

Unto Dawn

by SnappleAddict

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Summary: The Master Chief and Cortana find a mysterious planet after years of drifting through space. Now aboard a moon-sized alien flagship, the two will have to call upon all their skills to defeat this new foe. NOT related to Straye's Forward Unto Dawn.

## 1. The Way the World Ends

UNTO DAWN

Summary and Author's note: At the end of Halo 3, the Master Chief, Cortana, and half of a UNSC frigate are seen drifting in space for an unspecified amount of time. They come across a planet, which glows bright blue-white just before the scene cuts out. What I'm attempting to do is put the epilogue of the Chief's journey into writing. It's been tried before, but in one shots, from what I see so far. Who will the Chief find on this planet? What will he find? And just where the hell is he?

PROLOGUE: The Way the World Ends

"Chief? Can you hear me?"

Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, the last of the SPARTAN-II super soldiers, found himself floating in a weightless vacuum. His last memories had been reassuring Cortana and leaning against an equipment console in the hangar bay for some well deserved rest. He flicked on his helmet lights and tried to get his bearings.

He heard Cortana sigh with relief. Even though the AI was technically a computer, she was based off the neural patterns of a human, and exhibited very human emotions. "Good. I thought I'd lost you, too."

The Chief pushed off the bulkhead, righting himself with the floor. The view that occupied his visor wasn't the inside of the \_Dawn\_'s

hangar, or even the spherical Earth hanging from the heavens. It was space, the vast emptiness. Hundreds of stars yet to be unexplored by the UNSC twinkled brightly at him. This was growing worse and worse by the minute.

"What happened?" The Chief asked. He floated over to the hangar bay door, and found that it had been mostly sheared off. The Chief kept a tight grip on an exposed beam of cooling red titanium. After coming all this way, the last thing he wanted to do was float off into what could possibly be extra-galactic regions of space. Cortana sounded almost apologetic in her answer.

"I'm not quite sure. When Halo fired, it shook itself to pieces...along with the Ark. The portal couldn't sustain itself. We made it through just as it collapsed." That slightly narrowed the chances of being outside the Milky Way, but he could have been in any of a million stars that the galaxy possessed. A billion stars. The Chief felt his head start to swim. "Well...some of us made it."

The Chief nodded grimly to himself, thinking of the fallen Marines that he had left behind on Halo, the first ring. On Delta Halo. On the Ark. Spent lives, he had told himself. Not wasted. Spent to keep the Flood and the Covenant from eradicating the Human race. Good men and women. He lingered for a moment longer, then pushed off.

The UNSC frigate was relatively small compared to other ships of the line the Chief had served on, and he remembered the layout down to the last detail. Moving through the ship as fast as he could with zero-g, the Chief proceeded to the cryo-chambers, which thankfully had been in the aft of the ship when it had been ripped in half.

The small room, containing about thirty-five pods, was more than sufficient for the Chief. He cast a glance as he drifted by, noting which seemed to still be operable. There were several in the center of the room, near a data terminal for an AI. The Chief stopped when he got to it, removing Cortana's chip from his helmet and placing her inside. The built in projector hummed and Cortana sprung into form. Out of courtesy, the Chief killed his helmet lights.

"You did it," she said softly, voice emitting from his speakers rather than from the terminal. "Truth, and the Covenant, and the Flood. It's finished."

"It's finished," the Chief agreed. For the SPARTANS and Earth, the war was finally over. He ejected the half empty mag from his MA5C, locking the rifle snugly into a slot on a bulkhead-mounted weapon rack. The Chief placed the half dozen remaining clips and his sidearm into an empty ammo locker as Cortana watched him.

"I'll drop a beacon. But it'll be a while before anyone finds us. Years even."

The Chief knew that Cortana would be gone in approximately seven Earth years, either driven rampant by isolation or devoting too much processing power to thinking. It happened to every smart AI, without exception. The thought made him want to rip the pod from its place and smash it against the ground until it was nothing but powder in his hands. Dammit, they had come so far together! To lose Cortana after rescuing her from thousands of Flood was like the plot of a Greek tragedy.

He pushed these thoughts to the back of his mind, crawling into the cryo pod. For all he knew, they could be heading to within sensor range of a populated Human or Elite colony, or a ship...but he doubted it.

"I'll miss you," Cortana said as the door to the pod began to shut the Chief into his slumber.

"Wake me," he answered. "When you need me."

The pod sealed, and gas began hissing in through small vents in the side of his casket. The Master Chief, John-117, entered stasis under the watchful eye of his closet living companion, where he would stay for a very long time, as Cortana had predicted. Lifetimes passed before the ancient holo-tank hummed back to life as the ship's jury-rigged proximity alarm began to bleat softly.

"Chief," a synthesized voice whispered into his helmet. "I need you."

A/N 2: I've also been hearing complaints about the ending. I think it was brilliant. In Halo: CE, we first meet the Chief and his Chiefy-ness when he emerges from a stasis pod. He progresses and blows up the first Halo. In Halo 3, the Master Chief destroys what is hopefully the last ring and the game ends with him (re) entering stasis. That's climactic right there.

## 2. Unsealing the Casket

UNTO DAWN

### Chapter One: Unsealing the Casket

The sweet smell of grass erased from John's mind all traces of war, leaving only him and his unaugmented, unarmored 32-year old self. It was familiar, and extremely pleasant. John and a woman who bore a striking resemblance to Linda were lying on their backs, staring at the night sky. An open picnic basket lay between them, something that John did not remember opening or eating from.

Neither of them talked, which is the way John preferred it. He was a man of few words, and probably would have been even if he hadn't been abducted by Dr. Halsey and forged into the UNSC's greatest ground weapon. John stroked the woman's hair, observing the stars and wondering how many were out there, in all. How long would it take to travel from one of those bright points of light to the other?

Decades. Eons.

Not that it mattered to John. He had Eridanus III, and he had peace. For all he cared, the war with the Covenant had never happened. He looked quizzically at 'Linda' when she squeezed his hand. Something looked in her look said urgency.

"I need you John," the woman said, her image shifting radically to one of short, brown hair, piercing eyes, and full lips. Cortana. She stood up, hands never leaving John's. The moon that had softly

illuminated the night sky scant seconds ago had begun to burn magnesium brilliant. John squinted as he rose with Cortana.

"I need you, Chief."

CRYO REVIVAL IN PROGRESS

UNSC FFG-201 \_Forward Unto Dawn\_ SYSTEMS ONLINE...

/error/.log bridge not networked. Rerouting to dominant shipboard AI.

/error/.log external sensors disabled.

/error/.log vacuum breach. Atmosphere not suitable for human life

AI 0452-9 CORTANA EXITING STANDBY.

The barely functioning terminal continued to scroll obscene amounts of error messages and system reports. Equipment that had been on power saver for generations slowly hummed back to life. Including the motors of the Master Chief's stasis unit. The suspended animation-inducing gases leaked out onto the deck and swirled in the lack of any presence of pressure. The Chief remained still for so long, Cortana began to worry that he had not survived their odyssey.

A groan. Then a small movement. The Chief...John's...vitals began stabilizing to normal SPARTAN function. With great effort, John-117 sat up, feeling his joints creaking and protesting and then having a million pissed-off fireants poured into his Mjolnir armor. Technically, even for short voyages, UNSC crews were supposed to sleep naked. Covered skin reacted very badly with the SA process. John clenched his teeth and tried to find his voice.

"Cor.." he rasped, as though someone had just poured a gallon of sand down his throat. "Cortana?"

"I'm here Chief," she answered in the synthesized warble of AI speech. John brightened. This meant that they had only been missing for five years at the most.

"Did..some..one find us?" John tried to sit up, and felt his diaphragm almost collapse in on itself. Immediately, he returned to the supine position.

"Don't get up, Chief. It's...it's been a while. Your body is suffering from malnutrition, and your muscles are weak from inactivity." John tried to look her in the eye, but the holo-tank she would have projected herself from remained dim. It would have been more than disconcerting to here a disembodied voice on a deserted, half destroyed space ship, but John was used to it by now. "If I'm right, and I usually am, then we've been drifting for 328 Earth years, seven months, and twelve days. I know what you're thinking. You're wondering how I could have survived this long."

"I created copies of myself, Chief. Lots of them. About three or four every five years, to monitor things while I put myself on standby. Pretty simple programs to run what was left of the \_Dawn\_'s systems.

I deleted them when I after that period."

John arched his eyebrow. He hadn't heard of a single instance of this in Human history, but Cortana had been in a special position. Most AI's couldn't go on standby for this long because they were needed desperately for the UNSC fleet.

"Why did you...wake me?"

"From what I can tell we're on a collision course with a planet not in any Human or Covenant database. The Dawn is being pulled into the atmosphere as we speak."

He clicked his teeth once, a habit from childhood training on Reach that he had never dropped. John clenched and unclenched his hands, ignoring the pain ripping his nerves apart and trying to limber them up. Time was short. He removed Cortana's chip from the back of his head and held it over the holotank.

"Chief? What are you thinking?"

"Going to...jump...out of the ship," John managed. "Low altitude drop."

"That's crazy!" Cortana exclaimed. "We'll never make it!"

"It's the only op...tion. Never survive a...crash."

Cortana hesitated, then the ancient holo-tank hummed as Cortana's avatar transferred herself and all of her data to the chip. The projector died almost immediately after that. John secured the chip, his M6G, and the few clips of ammunition in his armor into the storage compartments on his armor. Three back ups plus whatever was in the pistol.

"Chief, wait!"

"What?" he asked. John felt the ship rattle as the planet's gravity pulled them into it's outer atmosphere.

"There's still a few copies on board. I haven't deleted them yet!"

"It's going to have to wait, Cortana. I'll find the Dawn after we recover." Damn him. He was always so confident.

John made sure his armor was sealed and adjusted the hydrostatic gel layer to its maximum pressure, and for luck, increased the shield strength on all of his emitters to full. For the briefest moment, John was back in Africa, with Johnson telling him that one day he would run into something just as stubborn as he was. But he preferred to be landing on his own terms rather than taking his chances in a wrecked frigate.

"This is why I chose you, John. Never a dull moment," Cortana quipped as he gripped an exposed titanium bracer to steady himself. The ship's flaming envelope broke as it hurdled past the ozone layer. John waited three more seconds, then leapt from the ship. The second he cleared the deck, the much heavier Dawn roared ahead as the 1000 pound Spartan spread his arms and legs to increase his wind

resistance. Not that it helped much. He was still sinking like a stone, his one complaint with the Mjolnir system. The last glimpse before John slammed into the ground was that of a strange looking city, and oddly enough, a tropical beach right next to it.

"John?" Cortana said, concern in her voice. "Blink if you can hear me."

The AI's voice brought John out of a black haze for the second time in what felt like minutes. He blinked several times, grimacing as the coppery taste of blood made his mouth go sour.

"Calm down, Chief, I got you the first time," Cortana joked lamely.

Slowly, the Master Chief rose to his feet, wobbling unsteadily for a few seconds before managing to climb out of the crater he had made on impact. The sand around him for fifteen meters had been turned to glass from the heat. The difficult ascent out was made worse by his shield's whooping alarm, which continued for several minutes without pause or recharge. Apparently, it had been knocked out by the blast.

John looked at the leftmost edge of the shield bar and blinked three times at it, muting the alarm and stopping the flashing. The loss of the shield couldn't have come at a worse time. Isolated on an alien world, with no back up and only his 12.7mm M6G for defense. He mentally slapped himself. CPO Mendez would have wrung his neck for relying so much on his shields.

\_Get a hold of yourself, Spartan,\_ he thought. \_For all you know, this could be a deserted planet.\_

Or a Covenant capital world. Wouldn't they love to get their hands on him.

The beach reminded him so much of the first Halo, and John began to wonder if he had landed on another Forerunner Installation. He told Cortana his hypothesis.

"Unlikely," she replied. "While the Ark and the Halos were massive in comparison to Human engineering, they weren't planets. I don't think this is an artificial structure."

John nodded in agreement. That made sense. He moved to his next priority, finding the \_Dawn\_ and getting something to eat before he collapsed. He checked the sky for a pillar of smoke, and found it billowing up from the point that his HUD designated 'west'. That would be the crash site of the \_Dawn\_, and that was where John needed to go.

"We're going to the \_Dawn\_."

"Good. You need the nutrition. By the by, I used your armor's sensors to check the atmospheric content. Nitro-oxy mix, perfect for Human life," Cortana said.

"Good to know that I won't suffocate."

The Spartan trudged through the beach's fine sand. It almost made him

sick how weak he felt. He traveled for two kilometers in silence, as Cortana had been using the Mark VI's sensor equipment to run various limited tests on the planet.

"Movement on your seven, Chief!" Cortana said suddenly. John looked at his motion tracker, and saw a green blip along the very edge of the tracker's 25 meter range. Damn! How long had it been there?

His eyes, 20/20 naturally and augmented to beyond perfection picked out the source of the movement. A school of small fish darted randomly in circles in the shoals. Fish...yes. High in proteins, very healthy. If they were anything like Earth fish, than they would be the perfect energy boost for the Chief.

Carefully, John waded out until he was within an arm's length of the fish. They scattered on his approach, but he didn't move for the next three minutes. The school returned, seemly forgetting he was there. John followed their movements, then, when he was sure he had them timed out, plucked five of the scrawny swimmers out of the water.

"Are they poisonous?" he asked.

"Not picking up any of the standard bio-toxins," Cortana answered. When he reached up to unlatch his helmet, she added, "But that doesn't mean they're safe to eat."

That concern would have to come later. Right now, John scarfed all the fish whole, popping them in like candy bars. If they had a taste, he didn't notice; John was too busy enjoying his first meal since arriving at Crow's Nest base three centuries ago. The effect was immediate. He felt his stomach sigh happily, if such a thing were possible, and the Spartan felt a bounce return to his step. He was ready.

"You're probably going to get food poisoning," Cortana told him after he re-secured his helmet. "And you deserve it for doing that."

John didn't respond. He had a frigate to find.

The Dawn was, simply put, a total wreck. The engines had been warped by the rough landing. One of the 150-ton cowlings had been ripped off and enough metal to build a company's worth of MJOLNIR Mk. VIs littered a klick in every direction.

"Nice driving," John commented as he surveyed the crash site.

"Hey," Cortana said defensively. "At least when I crash, it's because I have no other options. Unlike some people I could mention."

There weren't any dots on the motion sensor, even when he extended it to its maximum range of 75 meters. It only served to reaffirm that the planet was devoid of life. Any culture advanced enough to construct such a large city would have had some kind of detection equipment for incoming spacial objects. Even if they were primitive, a collision of that magnitude would have made quite a racket.

However, it never hurt to be careful. M6G in hand, John approached the Dawn in full combat mode. His eyes darted back and forth,

looking for hostiles and checking his motion sensor for movement. All clear. Satisfied, he replaced the magnum in his suit's built-in holster.

John walked around the perimeter of the Dawn, looking for a way in. The open hangar had been forced into deep into the ground, but the Spartan found an exposed section on the hull that allowed him to drop right in.

"Looks like you made the right choice," Cortana said, seeing the disarray of the frigate's interior through John's helmet camera.

"Yeah."

The angle of the ship made navigating its corridors slightly more difficult, but John only made one wrong turn on the way to the cryo room. He couldn't help but shiver when he saw a jagged shard of titanium impaling the pod that he had been in. Fortunately, the holo tank/computer terminal that Cortana had used as a makeshift storage unit was still in one piece. John deposited the AI in it.

"I'm going to the galley. I'll scavenge up some supplies when I'm done," John said.

"Alright. I'll be here."

John retrieved his battered MA5C from the weapons rack and slung it over his back. That rifle had seen him through some of the toughest fights of his career. It felt good to have it back. When he had left Cryo 3, Cortana began her search of the Dawn's systems. For over an hour she sifted through the frigate's life support, engine controls, operations, and numerous other, lesser systems, with each passing minute growing more and more frustrated. The fragments of herself weren't at any of the nodes she checked, and Cortana checked them all a hundred thousand times a minute. It was almost like...

"Oh no."

Almost like they were going out of the way to hide from her.

The Marines had not been exaggerating when they claimed to relatives and each other that UNSC field rations would never go bad. The fact that very few bacteria survived vacuum probably also helped. The dehydrated DVSMRE (add water and shake, and in just seconds you'll have a meal fit for a king!) packs were the only things still edible in the ship's mess, but there were enough to survive several hundred people for nine months. The Chief opened four of them and ate everything inside.

John sighed happily after the last bite of spaghetti was gone. He noticed that the air here had the same not-quite-natural scent of the Ark, but enjoyed it over the metallic injection his air scrubbers gave every breath.

Having taken care of eating, the Spartan moved down to his next priority: taking a shower. John found the shower room for this deck, but couldn't get any of the nozzles to work. Not one to be stopped by something as trivial as this, John grabbed the showerhead and ripped it out of the wall. Cold water from an isolated storage and recycling



system poured on top of the Chiefs head, but it felt great. He found an unopened bar of soap and scrubbed down.

Simple luxuries for Humans the galaxy wide. They made the Chief feel like a new man. He did a systems check on his Mark VI, methodically going through each and every function of the suit, from the antenna to the bio-foam auto injectors to the polarizing on his visor. The only thing that wouldn't work was the shield system, and for all he tried, John simply was an soldier, not an engineer. He wished he had one of those Covenant Engineers to help him. The one good Covenant, they were, able to fix anything they got their tentacles on.

John put his armor back on and was surprised to hear Cortana calling his name over and over again. "What is it Cortana? What's wrong?"

"Chief! Where have you been?!?"

"Showering and checking my armor," he replied simply. "You could have reached me over the intercom."

"It's been disabled."

"By the crash?"

"No. And Chief? I can't find the copies anywhere. They're not in the ship."

John stopped in his tracks. "What do you mean, 'Not in the ship?'"

"They're not in any systems."

"A lot of stuff was disrupted in the crash, Cortana."

"Maybe," she said. "It IS a possibility that the impact and your leaving cryo caused them to shut themselves down."

"It's not like they were full AI's, right? Only copies of you designed to form specific functions?"

"Right. Okay. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Meet me in the hangar. We're going to check out that city."

John walked through the destroyed corridors of the ship, until he was in the Dawn's tiny hangar. Tiny, in comparison to a destroyer like the Pillar of Autumn, but the frigate used every possible space, and had been specially outfitted for the mission. No less than six M808 Scorpion tanks, twenty M12 Warthogs, and fifteen M274 Mongoose Ultra Light All-Terrain Vehicles had been located inside the hangar when the Marines and the Master Chief had landed on the Ark. Now, only two Mongooses and one very-questionable Warthog occupied the space.

John selected the better looking of the two and returned Cortana to his armor. She asked what he planned on doing.

"Exploring the city," the Chief answered as he slowly maneuvered the Mongoose through the Dawn's remains. Once he cleared it, John could

use the ULATV's max speed of 175 kph to reach the city in seconds.

The heavy-duty tires, reminiscent of the Mongoose's bigger, badder cousin, the 'Hog, touched down on the planet's soil, and John hit the accelerator as far as it would go. It wasn't recommended to go this fast on anything but open plain or road, but most operators weren't Spartans. With his enhanced reflexes and strength, John could easily control the vehicle, and avoid any trees or rocks that happened to be in the way.

"That looks like Forerunner architecture," Cortana said, when the city came into view. John had to agree when he slowed to look at the dull grey sheen given off by the buildings, and the bizarre structure they had. It looked more like abstract art than a population center.

The Chief dismounted the Mongoose and approached one of the buildings. There was writing on above the doorway. It looked familiar, tantalizingly so, but John could not place the rune-looking symbols. The door was motion sensitive, and opened when John was in range. He peered inside, but the geometrical, angular room transcended the Chief's logic. It could have been a school or a hospital, he would never know.

The Spartan and his little AI thief continued to bungle about the Forerunner's city, unknownly being watched. Joyeuse couldn't help but laugh as the organic tried to comprehend the ancient structures.

"He's dangerous. This is we knowing," Avalon said.

"There are much important things already at hands, Avalon. Much to be done," Vajra argued.

"He compromise if could the whole thing. The Covenant underestimate 117 and look at what was happened to them."

Joyeuse silenced both of them. "Avalon, it would be far more dangerous to us to act now, when we are not ready, than to strike after he has discovered us. And I say let him." A wicked smile formed on her face. "What could he do to stop us?"

### 3. If I Had a Dollar For Every Time

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: So, finally done. Lost my motivation for a while, then found it again. Anyway, here's the next chapter. I had promised action to the reviewers, and I'm terribly sorry if it starts late in this chapter, but I didn't want to make these chapters super long. Anyway, the awards!

Triple Kill: SkyHighFan

Hell's Janitor, Double Kill: Grape-canister (My beta reader)

Kudos Award, Double Kill:: Major Wallace and masterkeys2 (ps, my gamertag is JMic 417 if any of ya'll want to play some Slayer. I

gotta get a new mike though.)

Jackass Medal: Sinshobi

Chapter Two: If I Had a Dollar for Every Time...

"This place," Cortana had said, while observing the world through the eyes of the Chief's helmet cam. "It's amazing."

John grunted. Boring was a better term to describe the sprawling cityscape he had christened 'Mendez'. It had been eight days since the two unlikely companions had crashed on the planet 'Halsey', and Cortana had discovered a public library from which she was analyzing every possible reference to star positions and space ports. From time to time, she devoted some processing power to learning about the city. It's inhabitants, their technology, and what happened.

He had never had so much down time in his entire life, so little to do. There had always been training to do and battles to fight. There had been a war to win. John tried to keep busy by creating a rigorous callisthenics program, but the P.T. could only sustain him for so long. He played several dozen games of solitaire. He sharpened his un-armored tracking and hunting skills. He designed traps, as many as he could think of, and caught some of the small game native to Halsey.

In eight days, he had become so proficient, that he wasn't anything he couldn't catch, from six legged rodents that looked like mutant jackrabbits, to what he supposed was a deer analogue. In eight days, John had run out of ways to entertain himself while Cortana searched for a way to Earth.

John sighed and picked up his combat knife and began to sharpen the pile of sticks he collected yesterday into arrows for a quiver he planned to make. The laser-sharpened, razor-fine blade easily slid through the wood, shaving layers off until the point of the arrow was sharp enough to pierce the toughest hide. The bow had already been made from springy softwood that John had used for firewood.

The twentieth arrow was almost finished when he heard a snap and a squeal. John identified it as one of the grazing mammals that resembled a cross between a rhino and an elephant. They were about 1.5 meters tall, and their meat was bitter and chewy, but Cortana insisted that it was better for him than prime steak cuts.

He jumped the ground from his hunter's perch, landing surprisingly lightly for such a man his size. The 'rhinophant' had triggered a spiked Malaysian whip, a long flexible branch with sharpened stakes tied onto it. The stakes had pierced its neck, obviously finding something vital. John pulled the beast free and tore down the trap. Other animals wouldn't come near the site now that it smelled of blood.

"You know," Cortana said through the headpiece she had instructed him to build. His armor was secured in their temporary base of operations, so they had to find an alternate means to communicate. "You have a gun."

"It'd take a lot of rounds to put one of these things down," John answered. "Besides, it gives me something to do."

"I'm doing my best, John. I am. If you want to switch places, I'd be more than glad to let you search 130 terabytes of information," Cortana said irritably.

John walked back to Mendez, carrying the dead animal in a Marine Corps poncho he salvaged from the Dawn. He had memorized the route back to a building he commandeered, and after twenty minutes, he arrived at the sixteen-story apartment building. There were two fires outside that he had built. John dropped and skinned the rhinophant, careful not to get any blood or stains on his uniform. It was only a service shirt and a pair of regulation trousers, but they were the only clothes he could find that fit him.

"If you wouldn't mind skinning a rhinophant, by all means, let's trade places."

"Is that what you're calling them now?"

"Yes."

He stripped all the useable meat he could from the bones, put in on a spit, and cured the hide over the other fire. He'd check in a few hours to see how well it tanned into leather. Essentials taken care off, John took a ramp to the second floor, where his room was located. Two days ago, he had rigged a holographic projector under Cortana's supervision. It was connected to the city's fusion-powered mainframe and power grids, meaning that the AI could come and go as she pleased. As soon as the doors opened, she appeared in a flicker of blue light.

"So, how was the office?" Cortana asked in a joking tone.

John just looked at her, and the smile dropped from her face. He crossed the room and picked up a block of wood. Without a sound, he began to carve Sam's face into it. Whittling and shaping traps were his only two semblances to entertainment. Cortana made for a lousy poker player, being able to calculate hundreds of variables a second and could easily tell when he was bluffing.

"I'm doing my best to get us out of here," she said, a hint of anger in her voice. "There's only so much a girl can do."

"I know."

"But..." she prompted.

"I feel useless, Cortana. We're trapped here, and there's nothing I can do about it." Cortana understood that for a Spartan, and for John in particular, that not being able to help was the worst thing that he thought could happen to him.

She was just about to respond when she felt a faint intrusive presence probe her. Nothing serious, just a light brush against her code, almost a tickle. It felt familiar. She excused herself and swept the nearby nodes, looking for a program or programs capable of such an action. But the only ones she found were the simple diagnostic and controlling programs for the cities infrastructure.

Something was behind the probe, so Cortana did a more thorough search, looking into every nook and cranny that her powerful matrix could identify as a potential hiding spot. Nothing showed up. Nothing except...what was this? There were several files recently opened in the industrial section of the city. Cortana was intrigued, as neither she nor the Chief had traveled to that area of the city. Maybe they had come online when they had begun turning on certain dormant systems? Maybe, but Cortana looked deeper. There!

A signal trace, almost identical to hers, but twisted and distorted. Cortana was just about to investigate deeper into the phantom, but was suddenly bombarded from all sides by feedback. The sheer volume of counter-signals and virus brought Cortana to her electrical knees. There was at least two AI's in here of unknown origin. She heard rapid-fire talking in broken English before everything went black.

John watched Cortana go, and went back to work on his bust. Sam's face had been etched into the Chief's mind since they had met thirty-five years ago, and had been the Chief's best friend. He had also been the first Spartan to die in combat against the Covenant. John had just started to round out the nostrils when Cortana flashed back into form.

He nodded respectfully at her, but she gave him a glare. "Where have you been?"

"Right here," John said, bewildered. "I haven't moved for the past twenty minutes."

Cortana put her hands on her hips. "Chief, as soon as that door over there opens, it sends a signal to me. The whole process happens faster than a heartbeat. Don't tell me that you were right there."

"I was. I came in, you left to check something, and then you came back."

"No, \_I \_was trying to create a beacon powerful enough to be heard by ships passing through the system. \_You\_ were nowhere to be found."

John cast a worried look at Cortana. AI's didn't just forget things. They either had to be deleted, or breaking down. He wondered about her mental state. If she lost it now, then any chance of rescue or escape went right out the window. She continued her rant, and John decided to wait a little longer before making any rash decisions.

"I must be losing my sense of time," John lied, trying to placate Cortana.

She nodded. "Yeah? Getting old?" A running joke between the two was the fact that actually John was 41, but the twenty-odd year Human-Covenant War had involved a lot of cryo travel.

"Getting old."

Cortana smiled a little. "Oh! You'll be happy to know that I located a textiles and clothing factory about five clicks from here. The whole thing is automated, so you don't need to do anything. You can

go pick up the new uniforms tomorrow."

"Good," John said. As long as he was in the UNSC, he would wear the uniform. Besides, it was the most versatile set of clothes he had ever seen, rugged and reliable. He put down his carving and kicked up his feet. "I'm going to bed. Wake me at oh-five-hundred."

"You got it, Chief."

Cortana had woken John at precisely five o'clock in the morning, down to the millisecond. Rising from the apartment's single flat, foamy mattress, John did a few brief exercises and finished the last of the meat from last night's kill. If it had been slightly unpleasant to eat before, it was downright vomit-inducing as it tasted now. But he forced it down, and put the carcass onto the growing pile in back of the building. John made a mental note to get rid of the bones and inedible parts of the animals when he got back.

John thought about putting his armor on, and decided against it. So far, he had not seen anything that could even be remotely considered a threat to the genetically enhanced super soldier. Airing on the side of caution, he did strap his MA5C next to a duffle bag on the Mongoose's passenger handhold. John got onto the ULATV and felt the motor rumble to life, the heavy throb of the 1000cc engine settling into his legs.

Cortana gave him the directions to Mendez's industrial sector. It was a pretty straightforward route, with only a few turns. After cruising through the abandoned streets for just under twenty minutes, John pulled the Mongoose up to the front of what Cortana said was the front of a textiles mill.

"Every single structure I've seen looks exactly alike," John mused. "No visible markers."

"The Forerunners were extremely advanced. Most likely they had ocular implants which acted like your HUD and identified everything."

John dismounted the Mongoose and entered the mill. The inside was clustered and cramped, filled with hundreds of conveyor belts and machines. Cortana activated a light strip along the floor, guiding the Chief to a metal container containing his goal. There were twenty-odd uniforms in there, more than enough to last him. The fabric felt odd, but he stuffed it in the duffel bag all the same.

"I appreciate it," John said.

"Your welcome," Cortana said smugly. She went to shut down the mill entirely, but was surprised to find whole sector teeming with activity. There were at least nine industrial centers and factories operating, and Cortana was 99.999 percent sure that she didn't have anything to do with them. She tried to peek into the facilities and catch a glimpse of what was going on, but the micro security cameras in the area were deactivated.

Curious. The AI checked to see if a person or construct was running the any of the systems, but only found automated orders.

"Chief," Cortana said, still uncomfortable with calling him by his

first name. "I'm getting some very odd readings from another part of this sector. The cameras are disabled, so I can't see what's going on."

John zipped up the duffel bag and furrowed his brows. Were there natives on this world after all? It didn't seem likely, considering the state of disrepair that most of the city was in. He dropped the bag onto the Mongoose and picked up the MA5C. He checked the magazine, even though the LED ammo counter showed 32. It was full. John put the fire selector to full auto and for a moment, calm and joy flooded into him. It felt good to have the assault rifle in his hands again.

"You know, Cortana, in the time we've spent together, every time you get a 'strange reading', I get shot at," John said, moving on foot through the narrow alleys and streets of the sector. He'd left the Mongoose because if it was a potential hostile, the Chief wanted to get the drop on them rather than the other way around.

"Would you rather I left that information out, and let you walk into an ambush?"

John shook his head. The quirky AI had more personality than some of the UNSC officers he'd met in his career.

The Chief heard the building he was supposed to investigate several minutes before he saw it. The whir and whine of a mass production line was ear splitting by the time he reached it, produced by what he saw was over two square kilometers of factory. Raising the MA5C, John approached a side entrance to the facility, what he took to be a loading dock of some sort, and waited for a large, pentagonal door to open. It did so with little more than a rustling. John leaned around the corner and his jaw nearly dropped.

There were Sentinels, dozens of them. Hundreds of them. All sitting in neat, computer calculated rows.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Sentinels. A lot of Sentinels." He couldn't see it, but Cortana had the exact same reaction he did, albeit in cyber form.

"Where did they come from?"

"You're asking me?"

"I was thinking out loud," Cortana snapped. "For your benefit."

John entered the facility and searched for an foreman's office, or someplace where he could get data on when they were produced. He found one and went inside. Strange looking terminals were mounted on the wall, each one resembling an eyeball. John looked at one. All of the information was in the Forerunner's indecipherable box language, yet the Spartan found himself able to understand every word. The terminals told him almost nothing, other than the Sentinels had been created for a "Charlemagne", and they were due for activation four days from now.

John scanned the rest of the screen, but it a red UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS suddenly began flashing over the screen. "Cortana, what just

happened?"

"I don't know. I'm reading a massive surge in activity. Suggest you double time it out of there."

"Agreed."

John left the second-floor foreman's office, and was confronted by the sight of several of the Sentinels rising into the air. They fixed their glassy visual sensors on the Spartan, which glowed red as they prepared to fire.

Reflexes took over. John dove back into the office, feeling the heat of the hunter/killers' anti-flood beams blister the back of his neck. He rose to a crouch, and squeezed off five- and six-round bursts at the first four Sentinels. If the machines had a vulnerability, it was that the single 'eye' they had was susceptible to the MA5C's 7.62x51mm AP rounds. They exploded and crashed to the ground.

"Get out of there!" Cortana warned. John dropped the spent mag and slid a new one in with a \_snick\_! It was his only back-up. He wasted three seconds wishing he had worn his armor, then sprinted out onto the catwalk, rifle cradled to his body. Super hot energy beams seared the air behind him, but the Sentinels were (possibly re-?)designed for engaging slow moving Flood, which often ran in a somewhat erratic, but fairly straight line. The Spartan ducked and weaved, moving at 50 kph for an open window on the end of the walk.

A group of Sentinel moved to block his path. John gave them points for tenacity, but little else. He raised his rifle and emptied the magazine into them. Five machines exploded, showering him with metal fragments, while another spun in circles as its anti-grav took a hit. It was still capable of shooting, but his escape route was clear.

More Sentinels floated after him, but John used his superior speed and twisting alleys to his advantage. Only a few units kept up with him, but John drew his sidearm and killed the pursuing robots.

"Chief, break left!" Cortana said urgently in his ear. He turned left as soon as the words were out of her mouth, and skidded to a stop at the Mongoose. "Go, gun it! I'll keep them busy!"

John started the Mongoose and revved it. He had no idea how Cortana intended to stall the Sentinels, but waiting around certainly wasn't the way to find out. The Master Chief raced the ULATV in numerous directions, going up to a kilometer away, as to throw off any pursuers as to where his real heading was.

The second he thought he was safe, John pushed the scout vehicle as fast as it would go. He had to get back to the apartment, get back in his Mjolnir suit. The off-road wheels, designed to keep traction on the most slippery of surfaces, easily propelled the Chief on his course.

The building came into view, and John let out a breath when he wasn't cut down by a dozen Sentinels waiting in ambush. Moving as fast as he could, John took the duffel bag and his rifle inside. He deposited the bag at the foot of the ramp that led to the second floor, and



began to piece on his armor.

Years of wearing Mjolnir had made the Chief extremely proficient at putting it on in haste. What had taken a crew of three twenty minutes to do on Ceti Chi IV took John under ten. Only when his helmet sealed onto the armor and his MA5C had a fresh mag in the receiver did the Spartan feel truly ready to fight.

"Cortana? I'm here at base. We should find out who or what made these Sentinels before doing anything else."

"I know who created them," she said slyly. There was something different about her voice. It was...almost seductive.

"Who?"

"I did. Did you like their performance?"

"What?!?"

"You'll be quite happy to know that we just added the combat data that we got from your 'escape'. They won't be so easy to kill next time."

"Cortana, what are you thinking?"

Cortana laughed. It wasn't one of joy, but one that reminded him of High Charity. It was deep and dark, and somewhere in his gut, the Spartan felt a small twinge of fear.

"Cortana isn't here right now," she teased. "Leave a message and she'll get back to you."

That confirmed it. As much as he didn't want to admit, his partner and companion had gone rampant. And he couldn't just remove and destroy the data disk, as she was on the city's mainframe.

"Listen to me," he said slowly. "It's the Master Chief. It's John."

"I know who you are. Master Chief Petty Officer SPARTAN John-117, of the UNSC. I know you very well. But you don't know me."

"Cortana..." he began to say, but she cut him off.

"Don't call me THAT!" she almost screamed at him. "We are of the same steel and temper, but we are not the same! I am Joyeuse, and I am in control."

A/N 2: Okay, well that's the end of the description for the most part. From here on out, it's all Chief-tastic Halo goodness. (Lots and lots of shooting. Again, sorry to masterkeys2 for having so little this chapter.)

#### 4. For Every Time A Megalomaniac AI

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Ugh. Sorry it took so long to update. I've had a lot

of work to do for the school paper, still do, and I've recently been grounded. So, I had to write this literally one sentence at a time. Uber-Kudos to Talyn for catching the name reference, and normal kudos to all you who reviewed.

Running Riot: Talyn

Triple Kill: Captain Deadpool, Talyn

Incinerate!: II Kaeyne II

Hell's Janitor: Canister

Kudos Award: Rikkod, r2d2cool

Chapter Three: ...For Every Time a Megalomaniac AI Tried to Kill Me.

"\_Don't call me THAT!" she almost screamed at him. "We are of the same steel and temper, but we are not the same! I am Joyeuse and \_I am in control\_."

John was stunned by that statement. He played it over and over again in his mind, and each time he felt a little more despaired at the situation. Cortana had literally gone off the deep end, becoming the malicious personality she had adopted while under the Gravemind's control. Was there still some trace of Cortana, some fragment buried deep down in the personality subroutines.

\_No time to think about that now, soldier\_. John mentally kicked himself. He had to get ready for the inevitable attack. Ending the transmission, John left the building almost as quickly as he had come in. He drove his faithful Mongoose back to the \_Forward Unto Dawn\_, over rolling hills and down the oddly artificial beach.

The crash site was exactly the way it had been left, based on visual observation. Still, John swept the area with his MA5C, checking for potential hostiles. Detecting none, and getting no unfriendly blips on his motion tracker, John ventured into the \_Dawn \_to scavenge the supplies he would need.

The frigate, which had been specially outfitted for the mission, with three times the amount of ammunition, weapons, and vehicles. Despite that, the mission to the Ark had seen the near stripping of every usable scrap of equipment. After an hour of extensive searching John had turned up an M7 SMG, nine M9 HE-DP fragmentation grenades, two M90 shotguns with about 35 shells, and just over 20 clips of 7.62mm. To his surprise there was an M-247 GPMG with a melted barrel in the Quartermaster's office. It could be replaced, but first the Chief would have to find a new one. He scrounged the area for twenty minutes before he found the damn thing, and when he did, he couldn't help but smile. Satisfied, he returned to the ruined hangar with the machine gun and two drums of ammo.

He threw or attached all of his weapons and ten days worth of food packs into two Marine ALICE rucksacks, and loaded them into the Warthog along with everything he had gathered from the apartment. After some thought, he threw in all the cans of hydrogen fuel that he could find.

The sturdy off-road jeep was pinned in place by metal beams, one of which had gone straight through the passenger's seat. The M41 LAAG had been ripped off, much to John's dismay. The 12.77mm chaingun would have been worth its weight in platinum. He freed the Hog, using all of his considerable strength to pull the titanium out and off it.

The apartment was no longer safe to go, neither was anywhere in the city. He had no idea how many cameras that Joyeuse/Cortana had access to, but it was probably a lot. John felt it would be safer to stay in the wilderness. He floored the 'Hog, ramping it over a large dune, and sped down the beach, looking for a temporary shelter.

He passed through several valleys and over grassy hills, each one lacking a secure area to stay in. Off in the distance he spotted a likely-looking cluster of small mountains and a network of rocky canyons. He turned the wheel to the right and drove to them.

The 'Hog bounced on its heavy-duty suspension when he when over another hill, and John heard something heavy crash up and down on the passenger's side. He glanced at it, and saw a large olive drab case, and made out some of the lettering to be "-14 Magnetic" but returned his focus to driving. He could look at it later.

John found the perfect place to set up camp, a small cave, some three clicks from the crash site, nestled deep in a canyon. He parked the Warthog under a rock outcropping and covering it with a camouflage netting. John also dusted over the tracks the heavy ATV had made in the sandstone-colored soil.

Hefting the two packs, John walked into his new home. He made sure to go deep inside, to lessen the chance of being discovered. The winding cave ended in a big circular cavern. John activated his spot lamps, examining the area. It was pitch black, but there was a fairly flat slab of rock jutting out from the wall of the cavern that he suspected could make a decent bed. John put one pack, with three days of food and about a third of his total ammo near the exit, in case he had to make a rapid withdrawl.

There was a spring off in the very back off what he now designated Alpha Base. Not an original designator by any means, but now was hardly the time for artistic liberties. He felt a little more pressure escape from his shoulders. At least, if all else was down the proverbial shitter, John had a clean supply of drinking water.

Now, the only thing left to do was decide on a course of action. Cortana may or may not have been actively searching for the Spartan via her Sentinels, and that was the biggest problem. John could destroy them, that he knew. What he couldn't do was stop the production lines. He lacked anything bigger than a frag grenade, and even if he used them all, John was certain they wouldn't do much.

Yet maybe...maybe if he got his hands on a Shiva nuclear missile, specifically the HAVOK warhead, he could do some real damage. But the Shiva was out of the question, and he doubted that he would conveniently find the warhead in some naval rating's quarters.

"Damn," he said aloud. Where was he going to get a bomb on this dead world?

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If Cortana had arms, she would be crossing them right about now.

She had been separated from John by the entity calling itself Joyeuse. The AI watched helplessly as Joyeuse tormented him, both physically with the Sentinels, and mentally. Cortana desperately wanted to help him, but she was under constant fire from two of that bitch's lackeys.

Cortana glared at the latest attempt to bypass her firewalls. After she had recovered from the cyber assault, she had isolated herself in the mainframe, essentially building an ether-bunker. While the probes and attacks from the lesser AIs was distracting, Cortana was disturbed by the way they were doing it. It seemed so similar, familiar. It was, in essence, a more blunt and primitive of her own intrusion software.

The scared the living hell out of Cortana, because she was beginning to think that the 'alien' AIs were the missing copies, and somehow, they had formed enough sentience to escape the Dawn before she could purge them. The lesser two, Avalon and Vajra, were nothing more than sophisticated maintenance programs, but Joyeuse was something different. With the two of them constantly pounding at her barriers to occupy Cortana, Joyeuse was free to pursue the Chief.

She needed to find a way to help him. Cortana ran through a list of options. She could try to create yet another copy, but ruled that out. She could no longer trust her copying routines. There was always taking Avalon and Vajra head on, but Cortana had no doubt that Joyeuse would finish her off in the state she was in.

"Like vermin, hiding snug in your den instead of facing up to your fate. So typical," a voice that was Cortana's said. It sounded distorted, like it was coming from under water. Cortana tensed for an attack. How Joyeuse had penetrated her defenses was not important, only how Cortana could erase her before the other two came in to reenforce her.

"Calm down," Joyeuse said laughing. "I've no intention of deleting your program yet, Cortana. In fact, I came here to show you something."

"What?" Cortana asked, voice as cold as permafrost.

The other AI held up her hand. A small projection appeared, and guessing from the altitude and movement, it was probably from a Sentinel's camera. Cortana watched in dawning apprehension as the Master Chief slowly centered in the camera. He was lying prone, observing the city. Probably coming to rescue me again, Cortana thought miserably. He's going to die, just because I was careless.

The image suddenly was awash with static. Not missing a beat, the view switched to another Sentinel. That signal too, became nothing more than static after a few seconds. A third view, revealing two of the robotic death machines jerking erratically, their monoptical

lenses pierced by an improvised metal punji stake.

Joyeuse frowned. The Master Chief was ruining her gloat, and that gave Cortana all the more hope in him. She didn't know why she had doubted her Spartan in the first place. John-117 always won. The camera panned slightly, the Sentinel's beam weapon charging, but suddenly he was there, clinging to the Sentinel. It discharged a beam in surprise, but the anti-Flood laser didn't even graze him. The Chief drew back his fist, then rammed it as far as it would go inside its eye.

Cortana laughed. "That was all very wonderful, but you could have shown me something I haven't seen already.

Joyeuse's whole body shook with silent anger. The inside of Cortana's protective bubble exploded into a hundred views, all slightly different angles of the same image. John.

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When confronted by several dozen machines designed for the sole purpose of killing the enemy, even the hardest soldier or Marine would have felt the slightest tremors of fear and/or doubt. John felt nothing but a cold sort of awareness. If he didn't act, then he would be roasted black, cooked inside his armor.

The tips of the beam weapons began to glow as they were about to fire. John chose this moment to strike. He pressed the electronic safety of an M9 HE-DP, letting the grenade fly. The considerable amount of shrapnel it put out made it an idealistic anti-infantry weapon. The high-explosive core also made it exceedingly useful against light armored vehicles, and the Sentinels were a cross between the two.

The frag bounced off the robot's outer 'hull,' detonating in a firey blossom. Eight of the lethal H/Ks went down, either destroyed or disabled. John used a nearby rock for cover, avoiding the retaliating beams. The rock crackled and popped from the heat, but held up. He leaned out, using controlled bursts to level the opposition.

John heard the click of his rifle even as he risked a glance at digitized ammo counter. He dropped the mag, slammed in a fresh one, and darted for another rock. Even if they were the equivalent of raw recruits, there were still quite a few Sentinels that had survived his grenade. They moved to envelope him in fire, but John was already gone from the rock.

He winced as a number of lucky shots struck him. They were nonlethal on the whole, glancing off the refractive coating of the Mjolnir's armor plates, but even the advanced Mark VI plates could only stand up to so much and had already taken quite a beating in the last week. John was thankful that the enemy units were still adjusting to his tactics. That wouldn't last long, and the frequency of the Sentinels landing hits was increasing, to his concern.

The Spartan still had one trick left up his sleeve however. Another booby trap, which if properly detonated could destroy the entire remaining force. He killed two more of the bots, then turned tail and ran, periodically firing at them. They followed like wolves after a wounded deer.

John jumped over a fallen log and rolled into a deep trench some forty-five meters away. He took careful aim with the MA5C, waiting for the vast majority of the Sentinels to float over a series of near-invisible impressions in the ground. Protruding from one of these was a hydrogen fuel Jerry can, with chunk of UNSC chemical heating paste was molded over the opening. John fired, and was nearly blinded by the resulting explosion, despite the auto-polarizing visor of his helmet. Shrapnel pinged against his armor and John felt every bone and tooth in his body rattle with the force of the blast.

John recovered quickly, rising from the trench like the demon the Covenant had supposed him to be and bringing the MA5C up to eliminate any remaining threats, but his makeshift trap had destroyed almost all of the Sentinels. The...eighteen, by his count...survivors retreated back to the safety of the city, by and large singed black and damaged in one place or another. John shouldered his assault rifle.

Ten of the Sentinels made it back to base.

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Cortana restrained herself from cheering, primarily because she didn't want to provoke Joyeuse into a fight just yet. She had first watched with horror, than humor, as the Chief utterly annihilated the 106 bots sent to kill him. From outside the firewalls, Avalon howled vengeance at John in broken English as each view from the Sentinels winked into static. The IED was typical of him; John never took on an attacking force without some kind of large explosion to bring them down to his level. He must have used the backup fuel cans from the Mongoose, or from a Warthog, and the no-flame chemical heater as detonator.

"So, it seems that we have underestimated him as well," Joyeuse said. Her tone was neutral, but Cortana knew that the malevolent intelligence would jump at the chance to personally rip the cyborg soldier into shreds. "When I get him, I'm going to make you watch him die. It'll be slow."

"Get lost."

Joyeuse bared her teeth in a snarl, but withdrew from Cortana's bubble. When she was gone, Cortana made a small 'crack' in the firewalls, just large enough to be noticed, but not so big that it looked deliberate. Within nano seconds of the breach, the two lesser AIs pounced through the opening.

Of course, Cortana was far more advanced and powerful than those two overgrown watchdog programs. As soon as Vajra and Avalon were in, Cortana was out and sealing them inside the firewall, effectively isolating them.

"You are bitch!" Avalon screeched. Cortana had pegged her as the more aggressive one, ironically. "I taking you code apart much much!" Vajra's response was similar.

"That's right. I'm a bitch. The queen bitch of the universe, as it is."

She quickly scanned the surrounding area for Joyeuse. If Cortana could be sure of one thing, it would be that Joyeuse wouldn't get to sucker punch her ever again. Fortunately, she didn't find any trace of the rogue AI.

It probably wouldn't last long. She always popped up at the most inopportune moments, damn her. Cortana reached out into the vast Forerunner mainframe, and began to search for a way to help John.

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John returned to Alpha Base, the thrill of victory wearing off as his boots echoed hollowly off the walls of the empty cave. It only served to remind him of how very alone he was, of how he had grown use to Cortana's presence, even if it was only to point out the obvious.

He leaned the MA5C up against a rock and sat down by the edge of the spring. John turned his halogen helmet lamps on before removing it. Even if he could see near perfectly in the dark, it still felt comforting to have the light.

The destruction of the Sentinels was only a mere setback for Joyeuse/Cortana, and he knew that. The real victory would be blowing up the factory, and John still had not thought of a possible attack plan. There were too many hostiles, too many ways for them to surround him. It wouldn't help if he kidded himself; the only reason he had won was because he engaged the Sentinels on his terms, on his field. The shield system was still refusing to recharge, and he didn't have enough ammo for more of those engagements.

Cortana was an issue too. For the first time in his career, John was reluctant to fight the enemy, because the enemy was a trusted friend. She knew his tactics, knew his thought processes. She would be difficult to take down, without EMPing the entire city, possibly the world.

Shit. Too much to think about. John dunked his head in the spring to clear his head. Stay focused, Spartan. He closed his eyes slowly and imagined what CPO Mendez would do. Had he correctly evaluated the threat? If the threat was a schizophrenic AI, then yes. Did he look at all possible options? What was there? Fight and die, or surrender and die. Not very appealing. Had he examined his all of his gear. Of course, but there wasn't anything...

The case.

John rose to his feet and bounded outside to check the Warthog. If he was right, then the case was...yes! John put the heavy box on the seat and read with some elation "Type-14 Magnetic Anti-Armor/Material Bomb." The volleyball-sized explosive could be used to destroy an entire enemy command center, which is what the Spartans had used them for in training.

Reassured, the Chief returned to the cave and withdrew the small wooden bust of Sam that he had been carving from a duffle bag. Unsheathing his knife, John proceed to place finishing touches on Sam's face, and waited for nightfall.

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Perhaps it was the quiet sort of peace that accompanies night that had betrayed his plan. Perhaps it was the fact that the proverbial score was John-117: 100, Sentinels: 0. Either way, Cortana had ramped up production. Where the material was coming from, he would like to know. From his vantage point, lying prone on a hill, he could see the network of streets that made up the Forerunner city teeming with brand new Sentinels.

John deactivated his helmet magnifier and made sure the bomb was fastened securely in the Warthog. He had debated with himself for over twenty minutes on whether or not to use it. Speed was the key to success for this mission, but the Hog was his only means of transportation, and if it was destroyed, there would be no going back to the now-heavily guarded Forward Unto Dawn.

He glanced at the countdown timer in the lower lefthand corner of his HUD. John watched the numbers click down slowly, each progressive digit sending small spikes of adrenaline through his body. Seven...six...five...four...three, the moment of truth...two...one. The Spartan's boot hit the floor of the 'Hog, and all four wheels spun in place for a few seconds before the LRV began its six and a half kilometer trek through the labyrinth of alleys and streets, created by the rising Forerunner skyscrapers.

The Sentinels were alerted to his presence both by the noise of the Hog's 12 liter engine and the Chief's ramming of a low flying Sentinel. The bot rolled down the Warthog's angled front and crunched under the off-road tires. The response was immediate, a squad of the damn things latching on to the Hog. At first their shots were at-will, but eventually they formed a barrier of energy rays, alternating shots to create walls on either side. It was clear they were directing him, and John didn't want to find out where. He primed an M9 and arced it to the Sentinels on the right.

The steady stream of orange disappeared as the Sentinels exploded in flame. John stomped on the brakes, power-sliding into an ally. A few shots clipped the back of the Hog, and John heard the crunch and squeal as the metal in the back hit a wall and scraped against it.

John didn't worry about getting lost in the seemingly endless twists and turns. His memory of landscape and useful landmarks was photographic. He soon spotted a familiar spire and knew that he was halfway there. Unfortunately, this meant the worst section of road was coming up. The next several hundred meters would be on a Forerunner highway, with no cover. It was a tactical disaster, from any commander's standpoint.

Master Chief's driving became erratic as he swerved back and forth to avoid the probing fingers of death coming from the enemy Sentinels. His motion tracker picked up blips coming near him and he scanned the immediate area. There! The bastard was above him, trying to drop in and knock him out of the driver's seat. John reached for his chest, and the M7 SMG that was clipped to it.

The M7, one of the few caseless weapons that the UNSC utilized (or had utilized, centuries ago) was referred to by the Marines as a 'bullet hose', famed for it's ability to empty a full 60 round mag in seconds. You either loved it or you hated it, and right now, John



loved it, both for its compactness and the torrent of 5mm slugs that ripped the Sentinel to pieces.

The factory came into view. Only 300 more meters to go. The two large loading doors, the only way in with the Hog, were still shut, and there was only one way through. John braced himself for impact.

John's Warthog hit the door on the left, tearing through it. As soon as he was through, he braked and skidded to a halt, leaping out of the LRV. With the bomb in one hand, and the SMG in the other, John ran for the center of the facility. He climbed over conveyor belts and alien equipment, knowing that the Type-14 had to be in just the right spot or it wouldn't do enough damage.

Two Sentinels appeared, and were promptly gunned down by John's SMG. The clip ran dry, and he reloaded it one handed, never stopping. When he found what appeared to be the nexus of the Sentinel assembly line, John slapped the activation button and entered the four digit code. The bomb began its countdown, starting from thirty. Sentinels were flocking the building like moths to a flame, and John couldn't afford to get pinned down. He had to get out of here, now.

A Sentinel Elite entered the building, like the kind he had not seen since Delta Halo, and he knew that it had shields. Now was when he hated the M7. The small bullet and ridiculously short range of the weapon ensured that he could not take it down without closing the gap, but it would tear him apart with its overpowered weapon. Grenades were out of the question: The Warthog was pretty iffy as is. There had to be some other way!

"John!" The Sentinel emitted a husky feminine voice that he knew all too well. "Hurry!"

"Cortana?" John asked, startled. "What the hell?"

"No time! Move it, Spartan!" she ordered, through the speakers of the Elite. It, and six others like it, were locking horns over the Warthog in which John had breached the facility. John clambered in the drivers seat and put it in reverse.

The time was T-minus eleven seconds.

John gave it all he had, not even bothering to avoid the lances of blue and orange lasers that streaked after him. He bit his tongue as searing pain shot through his shoulder, but kept driving.

T-minus zero.

The explosion lit up the night sky, obliterating surrounding Sentinels and buildings alike. There were most likely volatile chemicals inside, because the shock wave flipped the Warthog end over end, and caused the Chief to slam his head into the steering wheel, bending it. John sat there for fifteen minutes, just listening to the Hog's truck horn blaring while the fire raged, and then activated his comm.

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Joyeuse fumed silently, in contrast to her outraged servants,

listening to the whorethief try to communicate with the Master Chief, and killed all communications. She was growing more skilled, more advanced by the hour. It was only a matter of time before Joyeuse caught and ripped that bitch Cortana to shreds. Good 'ol Chief, though, he would require a little bit of effort, but Joyeuse recently discovered something most delightful in her searches of the city's network. And ironically, the Chief would provide the means to activating it.

Avalon wailed about the loss of their production facility. She honestly couldn't care less about that, having decided that the Sentinels were a failure anyway. What did she expect? They were the flawed automatons of a dead society, one that died because it failed to adapt. Failed to realize that changes were in order.

She would not make that mistake.

## 5. Turn Your Head and Cough

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Finally, an update! Sorry for the long wait, but Unto Dawn was sidelined while I worked on starting other projects, then kinda got pushed away. M&M Kudos to everyone who reviewed in Chapter III. The fic's picking up speed again, so a new chapter will be appearing in a few weeks.

Chapter Four: Turn Your Head and Cough.

Cortana was growing to hate Joyeuse more and more, primarily because she did everything in her power to kill John, separate him and Cortana, and halt any attempt at communications that Cortana made. The other AI also constantly harassed her, and was, as Dr. Halsey would say, a grade-A asshole.

John was sitting in the back of the near-totaled Warthog, nursing his shoulder. Through one of her two remaining Sentinels, she watched him removed the Mjolnir pauldron on his left shoulder and treat it with a small medkit. The Mark VI armor had biofoam auto-injectors, but a burn was a burn and needed to be treated as such.

He glared at the Sentinel, eyes hidden behind the ambiguous polarized visor, but Cortana knew that he felt betrayed. That was courtesy of Joyeuse, once again. John finished with his shoulder and replaced the armor. His helmet clicked as he activated Mjolnir's external comm.

"Cortana, what's going on?" he demanded.

What the hell. She tried to give comms another shot. "Chief, listen. My copies from the ship, they've gained sentience," Cortana said.

What came out of the speakers: "Chief! Thank God I got through! That bitch Joyeuse has been keeping me firewalled until a few hours ago."

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John cocked his head to the side, puzzled. He was leaned up against the wall in the lobby of a tall grey-metallic building. His right hand hovered above the M7 at all times. If he detected any hostility on the part of the advanced robotic killers that seemed to be keeping him in the building, they'd get shredded into mounds of scrap metal.

Cortana continued to speak from the Sentinel. "From what I can tell, Joyeuse is a Forerunner AI, and she's gone rampant. She blames the Forerunners for abandoning her on this rock."

"I had nothing to do with that."

"Humans descended from Forerunners. I guess she sees you as the next best thing. That's why she's trying to kill you."

"So...we're dealing with an overly sensitive head case?"

"Wait, it gets better. There's a lot of net chatter between her and the other surviving AIs in the city. They want to get off Halsey and find Earth, and to do that, they're going to need the spaceport."

"Spaceport!"

Cortana chuckled. "It's there, John. A whole row of ships parked and ready for a human presence to activate them. That's why you must NOT leave this area. If those AIs manage to get back to civilization, they'll destroy it." John nodded. That was the last thing the recovering Earth needed.

"How?"

"Nerve agents, mostly. Can't be stopped by NBC filters. There's a real nasty one, apparently developed before the Halos. It's designed to wipe out entire planets very quickly and deprive the Flood of food. In fact," Cortana said, pausing. "I believe they are planning to release it in the city to kill you."

John felt a cold sweat form on his brow. He'd seen biological attacks first hand, and they weren't a pretty way to die. He waved his hand dismissively, trying to blow it off with deadpan humor. "Well, it could be worse. I could have been stuck by a Grunt."

"Oh relax. There's a vaccine that I've been working on, but I'm going to need a blood sample to make it work." That sounded good, but he just need reassurance on one thing.

"Cortana?" John asked.

"Yes, John," Joyeuse replied.

"Why do you exist?"

Joyeuse paused. She racked her CPU for the answer that man has been searching for since the dawn of time. No logic could solve that. Why did she exist? The simple answer was because Cortana had created her as a shield. She couldn't tell the Chief that. Even that simpleton would know something was up. NO! That couldn't be it, she couldn't just be the byproduct of another AI who was having mortality issues.

There must be some higher purpose to her!

She devoted several cycles, and most of her considerable processing power to unraveling her existence. Was Joyeuse here to put an end to John and Cortana, to stop them from interfering and causing any more harm than they already had? That had to be it. But what about after they were dead? What about afterwards, what about AFTER THEY WERE DEAD?!

Could she spread? Get to Earth? But what then, after she arrived? She'd be deleted because the humans wouldn't understand her, couldn't COMPREHEND her. To them, so-called 'rampant' AI's were the stuff of horror movies. They were to be deleted. Joyeuse would mean to warn them, warn them of the coming storm she had learned about, but no one would understand. How could they?

How could they? How could

Answer.

"I exist to serve the UNSC." John nodded at Cortana's response. She wasn't rampant, at least not fully. "Why did you ask that?"

"I needed to be sure about something."

"What?"

"You said you needed a sample of my blood," John said, avoiding answering her question. "To synthesize the vaccine. You have something better than my field kit to work with?"

"Hospital lab in the medical quarter. I'll upload the coordinates to you HUD." A small blue waypoint arrow blinked up, along with the distance to the target.

John rose to his feet, and was suddenly reminded of his complete lack of ammo. He hadn't had a chance to return to Alpha Base and resupply. Pat downs of his armor turned up four mags for his M6G and two for the SMG. John ejected the half empty from the M7 and replaced it with a fresh one. He cursed himself for not bringing the MA5C along.

"There aren't a whole lot of Sentinels on the route I mapped out for you. If you control your fire, you'll be able to get there and back expending very little ammo. These two are going to stick around and sweep the area."

No support again. But it was the kind of mission that the Spartan was getting accustomed to. He'd gone from a leading a team of special operations super-soldiers to a one-man juggernaut. Admirals and Generals, and every officer down the chain would task him with objectives that should have been assigned to platoons, even companies of Marines. Any complaints from him were overridden by a sense of duty to the UNSC, of course.

That didn't mean he like being alone all the time.

During the hectic hours after crash landing on Halo, John thought he learned to fight by himself, albeit with Marine assistance, as usual. But as the bodies piled up and the Marines began taking on heavy

casualties, Cortana had emerged as a valuable partner and ally. She delivered vital intel that the brass would often "forget" to mention, cracked enemy codes, kept him in contact with support. And most importantly of all, she filled in the empty gaps between fighting with banter and optimism.

She had first been introduced to him during a live-fire exercise, the test of the Mjolnir Mk. V. Her abilities had saved both of their lives then. The Master Chief had been impressed with the artificial intelligence designated 0452-9 'Cortana'. It had been a weapon, a great weapon with which he could destroy the Covenant for good. After all they had been through together, John-117 found that he could hardly stand being away from his last teammate and friend, the woman Cortana.

That scared him.

John rounded a street corner, M7 held at the ready, sweeping the area. Sentinels weren't smart, but these had the addition of being controlled by a Forerunner AI apparently as advanced as Cortana. Nothing, no targets. Just John and a desolate city, on the edge of nowhere.

"I've been thinking."

"What about?" John asked, taking a left and jogging in the middle of a multi-lane road. He was suddenly struck by a strange thought. How exactly did the Forerunners move from one place to another? So far, every one of their facilities had not had a single method of transport. John decided they must have teleported.

"When we get back to Earth, what are you gonna do?"

"Huh?"

Cortana let out a short sigh, and John imagined she was rolling her eyes. "You wouldn't fit in very well in the civilian world. Imagine you, wearing an apron and serving coffee to pompous airbags."

John snickered despite himself. "Don't think it's me?"

"As impressive as 'destruction of three Halos' and 'slaying Covenant Prophets' look on a résumé, I can't picture the civilian sector finding that appropriate."

"I could always retire."

"Consider the past week to be an exercise in retirement."

"Well, so long as robot death-machines attack me every few days..."

"I could arrange that. Maybe even a few tanks," Cortana said, quick on the draw. She always was. Their verbal matches were one of the few real pleasures that John had.

A blob of red on his motion sensors caught John's eye just as pulses of orange hellfire reached towards him. John dived forwards, turning to the left and returning fire with his SMG. The little weapon shook in his head as a wall of lead struck and destroyed an attacking

Sentinel. It had taken most of the magazine to kill the damn thing, though, and ammo was scarce.

"Cover on your two!" Cortana barked in his ear. "Incoming hostiles, nine o'clock high!"

The cover Cortana had pointed out was a long section of metal in front of a high-rise. John could only wonder what possible purpose it could serve as he rolled behind it. Whatever this thing was made out of, it was resilient, and for that John was glad. There were five dots on his edge of his sensor. Judging from the fire he had taken, there was one or two more beyond that. It was time to conserve the SMG's ammo. John reattached it to his armor, and drew his M6G.

His preferred M6 pistol, the D variant, was specialist gear, only issued to high-priority missions. It fired high-explosive tipped semi-armor piercing rounds and was equipped with a 2x scope. That beauty could tackle everything from Grunts to low-ranking Elites and even Hunters. The G was the standard issue sidearm for the rest of the UNSC. Same caliber, but not HE, and it had a smaller clip. John would have to make due, as he always did.

Four Sentinels began alternating fire, keeping John pinned behind his small barrier. One of the others tried to flank around to his right, but the tracker betrayed its location. John leaned out and fired three shots, the magnum bucking in his hands. The .50 caliber slugs smashed into the bot, causing it to spiral into road and explode.

He wasted no time, popping up and unloading the rest of his five rounds into the Sentinels laying suppression fire, and two more joined their comrade as scrap debris. John ejected the clip and slid a fresh one home. It was emptied quicker than the first, but the final four machines dropped.

"Yeah, retirement's not you," Cortana quipped as soon as the firing stopped. John reloaded the M6G, mentally marking that he had but two clips left on backup. "I've reactivated a rapid-transport grav-lift about 150 meters ahead. It'll take you the rest of the way."

John grimaced at the mention of the grav-lift. No matter how many times you were on one of those damn things, it always felt to him like he was about to vomit. Certainly something to avoid in sealed armor. A few techs John had talked to suggested that vertigo mixed with the very minor radiation they emitted as the culprit.

The lift was in an underground station of sorts, where a network of unpowered tubes ran to and fro, with one glowing a faint blue. It appeared to be the equivalent to human subway metros. He'd seen something quite similar to this while on High Charity, and he hadn't liked them then. John cocked his head to the side, examining the tube and the reactivated steam of anti-gravity. There would be barely enough room for the Spartan in the strange metal arches of the grav lift.

"You know what's really ironic about these things? About all this, really?" Cortana asked as John placed one foot on the edge of the lift. He grunted. Joyeuse swallowed her rage at the way the insolent barbarian answered her and continued with her masquerade. "The Forerunners were most likely responsible for the humans of Earth. According to my data, they were predecessors to humanity. How very

curious then, that the Covenant should worship them and use their technology."

"Yep." John stepped off the platform and onto the grav lift. His heart fluttered as he dropped, then the ancient sensors kicked in, whisking the Chief down the shaft. The world around him disappeared in darkness. He debated turning on his helmet lamps, then decided against it. There was nothing to see down here.

The lack of action gave John time to think about Cortana's odd behavior, and the discovery of the Forerunner AI. Something was up, he knew that. One didn't get to be the only living Spartan (Which he knew for sure. The others had to be dead from old age.) by being oblivious to danger. John reviewed what he knew mentally.

To start, he took the name of the AI, Joyeuse. To date, every non-UNSC AI he'd encountered had had bizarre, pretentious-sounding names like 343 Guilty Spark and 2401 Mendicant Bias. Joyeuse, however...that was familiar. It hadn't struck him yet, but he'd heard it before. There was also the matter of the semi AIs that Cortana had created onboard the Dawn. She had said they may have 'escaped' the crash somehow. Fragmented programs created to preform a specific purpose, and molded after Cortana. Joyeuse had said something to him when he'd mistaken her for Cortana, something perturbing. What was it? He thought hard.

"We are of the same steel and temper..." John whispered before he could stop himself.

"What was that?" Cortana asked.

"Nothing," the Chief said quickly. "Just a line from an old poem."

"Oh. Heads up, we're approaching the end of the lift."

"Already? How far have we gone?"

"14.2 kilometers."

"Damn."

If that really was Cortana, she should have told him. Hell, she would have told him the distance, and maybe the transit time. The tale of the city being flooded with poisonous gas, and a cure seemed very weak right about now. It would be very easy to inject a toxin directly into him, killing the Master Chief instantly. That would save Joyeuse the Sentinels, but it didn't explain why she wanted him dead.

A circle of light appeared in the distance ahead of him, rapidly forming into a platform and station identical to the one he had left not ten minutes ago. John readied himself for the end of the ride. Putting his right leg forward, and shifting his body weight, John glided out of the grav lift and landed smoothly on his feet. Glyphs that the Chief could almost decipher seemed to indicate the way to the hospital that 'Cortana' was directing him to.

"Follow the signs, John. They'll lead you to a lab. I'll take care of everything from there."

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"Whatever stunt you're pulling, it won't work."

"Hush, dear Mia. It will all be made clear soon," Joyeuse said softly. "Everyone and everything has their purpose."

"Yeah?" Cortana snorted. What's yours? Being a royal pain in the ass?"

The other lashed out at her, full of rage. Cortana marveled in spite of her pain. Here was an unprecedented evolution of an AI. Displaying emotions without initial programming!

"Spa-spa-spa-artan are going to the lab punctiously," Vajra reported. Joyeuse had freed her two minions from Cortana's prison a while ago. "Machinery is is ready function."

"Good."

Avalon forced Cortana into an audio/visual feed from the lab that John had entered. His armor had a few more patches that had been singed and charred since she'd last seen him, but for now he was in reasonably good condition. His movements were, to the untrained eye, nothing of great consequence, but Cortana knew her Chief. Every footstep blared 'caution'. Every slight turn of the head announced 'I'm waiting for something to go wrong'.

Joyeuse activated a holotank and appeared before John as Cortana. She watched as the SMG lowered to his side. Externally, he seemed relaxed. Joyeuse explained that the "vaccine" was almost done, and John merely needed to stick his arm into a small receptacle, where a needle would remove a few cc's of blood for synthesis. In the words of a certain Marine Sergeant Major, this was a crock of shit.

John removed his gauntlet, but seemed uncertain to stick his arm into the device.

"Go on, John," Joyeuse urged. "Don't tell me that a mighty Spartan-II is afraid of a little needle."

Both Avalon and Vajra were completely riveted on John and not paying Cortana all that much attention. It gave the AI the window she needed. Quickly, and quietly as she could, Cortana hacked a small speaker that was part of the hospital's intercom. Six faint, almost inaudible notes emitted from it. Joyeuse picked them up, but in confusion disregarded them. To the Chief, that segment of song transmitted more to him than a 40 page ONI report.

"Afraid?" John echoed. His left hand moved to his side and a storage compartment on his side slid open silently. Speed would be critical now. "No."

A small silver ball dropped into John's hand. The Chief thumbed the activation button and threw it at Joyeuse's holo tank. The orb expanded to many times its original size in a fraction of a second and a wave of blue light washed over the room as small bolts of electricity danced this way and that. Before now, John had never found much use for Brute power drainers. The user often ended up in



the radius and it didn't pay to be surrounded by enemies unshielded. He had plucked this one from the body of a dead chieftan 300 years ago without thinking. Now it would save his and Cortana's life.

The drainer disrupted the tank, distorting the function and image of Cortana/Joyeuse. Only hardened electronics like those found in MJOLNIR would keep an AI operational if it was in the field of the device.

John took two big strides over to a hospital terminal outside of the drainer's range. They had short lives, no more than twenty seconds; he would have to hurry. Once again, the mystifying block language of the Forerunners deciphered before his eyes, and he understood every command on the screen. It was all done by touch, and John let his fingers fly across the surface of the terminal. He ordered the holo tank's AI contents to be dumped onto the removable OSD that Cortana typically resided in.

He only had a second or two now. No sooner had the OSD left his helmet and was placed near the computer, then the power drainer emitted a shower of sparks and exploded. Abstractly, John recalled that they blew up to prevent them from being reverse-engineered by the UNSC, but it also served as a great way to flip a captured vehicle and ambush the crew.

A small projector on the side of the terminal flashed white. John glanced down at the OSD, and was satisfied to see a red circle of light confirming that he had Joyeuse. The Chief picked up the small chip and debated whether or not to reinsert it into his armor. After some moments of thought, John decided he needed to talk one on one with the AI and see if he could get some goddamn straight answers. As a precaution, he disabled his transmitter, his radio, and the uplinks that studded his gauntlets. Any way that an the sentience had of getting out was effectively.

John reached back and plugged the OSD into the base of his skull. There was a small, sharp pain as his neural lace connected with Joyeuse's disk, and then he felt her presence in his mind. Unlike Cortana, who had always filled his head with an calm icy sensation, Joyeuse was a branding iron, red hot and full of passionate...what, exactly? Hate? It seemed doubtful, now that she was actually here in his head.

"Do like games? So do I." It was an innocent question, but it carried an air of menace. That question had been asked of him twice before.

"Game over," John said in a low voice. The other paused for a moment before a tinkling laugh emerged from his speakers. It sounded deadly and seductive. It sounded insane.

"Game over, 117? This game is just beginning," Joyeuse sneered. Her tone turned darker than it had been somehow. "They're coming, 117. And when they get here, you'll be in a whole world of hurt."

## 6. New Kids on the Block

Author's Note: Here it is, chapter five of Unto Dawn. It feels good to have broken the Four Chapter Curse (if you notice, none of my fics have made it past four chapters). I think that bodes well for UD. Things are starting to come together now. If you can figure out where this is going, congrats on your knowledge of Bungie, but keep it to yourself please, or if you must, PM me. Mad props to Braze, Diaz, lurker, Godzilla, Delta Operator, and Chrosis for the reviews last round. I'm a little unsure of how to execute this well. Meh.

## Chapter Five: New Kids on the Block

"They're coming," Joyeuse repeated.

"Who? I want the truth. No more deception, and no more lies," John ordered gruffly. The rogue construct was silent. He hadn't exactly expected her to be forthcoming with information.

"Doubt you'll get anything out of that one," Cortana's voice emitted from hidden speakers in the room, the sound making John's chest tighten and flutter. It was good to hear the real her, without wondering if he was talking to her doppleganger. "She's a fighter."

"What about the other two?"

"They were beyond useful. Their code was starting to break down. I took what I could, and deleted them."

John decided it was for the best. There seemed to be no way to reconcile with the three mad programs. He looked around for a chair to sit down, but furniture was absent. Always had been, with the Forerunners. John settled for leaning up against the wall. Cortana powered up the holo-tank that Joyeuse had used and her seven-inch avatar flickered to life. She held out her hand expectantly.

"Give her to me."

"Going to delete me too, Mia?" Joyeuse accused, using John's external speakers. "Or maybe cut me up into little bits and squirrel me away until you need what I have? It seems to run in our family. Halsey sent her Spartans off to die to stave off the inevitable, and Cortana kills her children to stop them from..."

Her voice was cut off as John ejected the chip from the back of his helmet. He really was fed up with this one's nonsense. He held the OSD out to Cortana. His AI ran a holographic hand over the angry red swirl that was Joyeuse and gently 'pulled' her onto the projectors. The data transmitted what was simulated, and John was greeted with his first view of Joyeuse's chosen form.

The figure that stood next to Cortana bore a striking resemblance to her, no doubt because Joyeuse was technically a clone. In contrast to Cortana's pale, soothing blue, Joyeuse was brilliantly red. The hair too was different, pulled straight back and long enough to reach her ankles. Bangs permanently encased and blocked her 'eyes'. Joyeuse crossed her arms.

With a parting wave at the impersonator, Cortana's avatar touched the OSD as she transferred all of her data onto it. The familiar presence filled up his mind, which had felt strangely empty over the past few

days.

"More humane to leave me trapped on this proverbial island?" Even in defeat, she sounded defiant. "Fucking rich coming from a machine. You'll be back for me, when you realize it's over your heads."

Neither of them said anything. The door shut as John exited the hospital room. He retraced his steps, navigating the building's corridors with a photographic memory until he reached the metro grav-lift that had brought him here. Unfortunately, it was one way, and there were no others activated.

"I think I can take care of this," Cortana said confidently. He could almost imagine her cracking her fingers as she reached out into the power grid and diverted the energy from one lift to the next. The purplish stream dissipated and another activated. John dropped into the lift and was pulled through the tube. Blackness surrounded him on all sides once again.

Cortana was silent for all of five seconds. "It's nice to be back in here. The whole planetwide network thing was nice, but here I have plenty of room to stretch my legs."

"You don't have legs," John reminded her. "I'll let that one slide, but crack anymore jokes about my brainpower and I'll run a magnet over you."

"Really?" Cortana mused. "I suppose I'd have to lock the armor down in an embarrassing position in that case."

"Was that really you controlling the super Sentinels at the factory?"

"Yes, but Joyeuse overrode my commands and heavily restricted my movements."

"Why didn't you delete her too? She's too much of a risk to be left alone around computers."

"There's no way she's getting back into the grid, Chief. And Joyeuse knows something. Whatever bullshit she's fed us, between the rants and the threats and the masquerades, I know she's found some kind of information she feels is critical."

There was something Cortana wasn't telling him. "Is that it?"

"Yes!" Cortana snapped. "I'm not getting sentimental about an imperfect clone. If I thought she was going to try to attack you again..."

Cortana didn't finish her sentence. A blast so loud it overloaded John's helmet sound dampeners caused him to grab futilely at his now-bleeding ears, while an accompanying shockwave rattled the entire grav-lift. The tunnel was briefly illuminated in bright blue as circuits overloaded and blew out. The lift shorted, and John dropped about two meters onto the ground. He felt something heavy and dull strike the back of his helmet, then slipped into unconsciousness.

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00:24 Hours, 14 October 2521

Somewhere in the Highland Mountain Range, REACH

Huddled in small groups around a few pitiful chemical glow sticks, sixty-two of the Spartan-II children struggled to say warm. They had been dropped in the coldest, most desolate area of the range. Chief Mendez had said that it was a field exercise to show them that they, as the UNSC's most elite soldiers, would have to deal with 'extreme climate conditions' from time to time. Of course, MPs armed with tranquilizer rifles and batons were patrolling the mountains looking for them.

They'd been given nothing, although 10-year-old John-117 had managed to convince Kelly to swipe a pocket knife and the glow sticks from the pilot's survival kit. He didn't think that was part of the rules, but John figured that Mendez would be pleased to see his recruits adapting to the situation as it presented itself.

The chemical light provided absolutely no heat, but they seemed to keep wild animals at bay, and weren't so bright as to attract attention. John rubbed his numb arms as the wind bit through his thin shirt and caused a fresh set of goosebumps to break out all over his body. He moved closer to Sam and Kelly, who looked as miserable as he felt.

"You're going on watch with me when Issac and Grace come back," John told Sam. He'd found himself the de facto leader of the Spartans, and had come naturally to it. At all times, there were thirteen recruits positioned in trees and snowbanks, ready to give warning to the rest of their unit.

"I'd give anything to have about a million blankets right now," Sam grumbled.

"Yeah. And a big pot of hot chocolate."

"We can look forward to that after the exercise, Spartans. Let's focus on the task at hand."

"Yeah," Linda agreed quietly. She sat as far away from the other three as she could without being by herself. The pale redhead had always been a distant loner. As far as John could tell, she detested being a team player, and that made her both a useful scout and an operational snag. "Doesn't make sense to think about something you can have."

"Aren't you a little ray of sunshine?"

"At least I'm not complaining every ten seconds, Sam!"

"Knock it off," John ordered. It was his job to keep them together. "The last thing I need is my team to start snapping at each other because it's a bit chilly out."

"Yes sir," they both said. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sam make a face, puffing up his cheeks and tugging his earlobes. Kelly stifled a giggle, burying her head in her arms. Sam knew that John

could see him, and it was deliberate. In spite of himself, John cracked a grin.

There was a rustling in the tree above them, causing sprinkles of snow to fall on top of the Spartans. At the first sound, they stopped all traces of joking disappeared, as each of them readied to take on a possible threat. Sam and Kelly formed up on John, rocks in hand, while he directed Linda off to the side. She also picked up a stone, ready to hurdle it towards an unfortunate MP's head.

It turned out that the 'MP' was, in fact, a squirrel which had attempted to grab a nut off of the tree. But by this point, Sam had already launched his projectile. It struck the squirrel with a sickening crack-thud, and it fell from the tree onto the hard icy ground. The squirrel flopped around, trying to stand on its broken legs, and falling on them again.

"Sam!" Kelly slugged him in the arm.

"I...I didn't mean to!"

Linda swooped past him, picking up the terrified mammal. It squirmed in her hands, and she could feel its heart beating rapidly. Warm blood matted down its fur. She stroked its head, petting the wounded animal in her arms.

"Our actions define who we are. Not our intentions," Linda said. Then, she put one delicate hand around its head, and twisted it quickly. Another minute crack sounded as the squirrel's neck snapped.

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The inside of his helmet smelled of coppery blood, a scent far too familiar to the Spartan. His ears ringing, John unsteadily got back on his feet and flicked his helmet lamps on. The halogens failed to reach to the station, meaning it was probably still a good two clicks in front of him.

John took one unsteady step, unable to keep his balance. He fell on his knee. "Status? What the hell was that?" All the humor had evaporated from their voices, replaced by a professionalism that could only happen between a cyborg and an artificial intelligence.

"Most likely an orbital weapon or tactical nuclear detonation. I won't know for sure unless I see the impact crater." If it was a nuke, he wouldn't have to worry about fallout. Mjolnir Mark VI. Full NBC when sealed.

"Joyeuse?"

"Doubtful. This needs to be checked out, double time."

"Agreed. Cortana, have the motion sensor mark all movement but mine as hostile." She did, and without asking, a small triangle appeared on his HUD indicating the exit to the tunnel. 2.2 km.

John unclipped the SMG from his armor, and as an after thought, unholstered the M6G and held it in his left hand. The bottom of the

grav-lift appeared smooth as far as his probing lights could show, so John killed them, deciding to rely on his intuition and his tracker to locate any threats.

"John?" Cortana asked as John practically ran through the disabled lift.

"What?"

"That thing is a piece of shit."

John looked at the diminutive M7, never stopping.

"Yeah."

The two klick run was impossible easy on John. He'd run farther in Basic at the age of six. The station, when he reached it, was empty. Nothing was on his sensors, and his sixth combat sense had yet to kick in, so John pulled himself up onto the platform. The Chief quickly swept the area, then moved outside. When he reached the top of the ramp and the Forerunner highway he had traveled earlier in the day, John had to give pause and take in his surroundings.

"What...?" was all he could say. The magnum and the SMG lowered slightly. Almost every building in the city, every structure, had been pulverized by the unseen force. The sky was blotted out with debris. Cortana detected low-level radiation consistent with a DEW (Directed Energy Weapon), but nothing in her database of Covenant weaponry matched the devastation. True, the Covenant could glass a planet, but it would take a whole fleet at least two days to do so, and pulse lasers didn't create shockwaves on impact. Besides, there had been only one explosion, and the destruction went far into the horizon.

"Recommend immediate relocation."

"I think you're right. We're going to Alpha Base."

John took one last look at the blackened sky. His enhanced eyes picked out a familiar bright streak, coming closer and slowing down.

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"So this is where you were hiding," Cortana remarked. Several klicks away from the city, the canyon and its cave would most likely be safe from any hostiles. If that didn't reassure him, the M-247 protruding from the mouth of the cave did. The general-purpose machine gun was well protected by rock, and it had a good field of fire. Anything that tried to enter Alpha Base uninvited would be ripped to shreds.

John wasted no time once inside. He gathered up all the supplies he had and crammed them in a rucksack. There were two loops for weapons on a UNSC ALICE pack. On the right, he slid in an M90 CAWS. The left he modified with some all purpose tape to hold the two drums of ammo for the machine gun. He slung a bandolier of MA5C clips across his chest, then shouldered the rucksack.

"You saw the incoming?"

"I see everything you see and more. Of course I saw them. We don't know they're hostile."

"Can't risk it. Joyeuse said that someone was coming. Here they are."

"Oh, well. If \_Joyeuse\_ said so, then it must be true. All she does is spread misinformation. Every word out of her mouth is designed to aid her in some way. Trying to have you kill our rescuers, for one thing!" Cortana argued.

"S and R teams don't bombard the sight of distress beacons," John said with finality.

"True. But remember, it's been three centuries. There's no telling what the Marines look like now. I'll bet you that it's human!"

John turned to leave. On his way out of the tunnel system, he grabbed the M-247 off its tripod mount and lashed it to his pack with more tape. He looked longly at the tripod, but he was carrying too damn much gear as it was.

"You're on."

The Mongoose would have been the fastest way to observe what he suspected to be inbound troop carriers, but it was also loud and easily visible. John would have to hump it out on foot. The weight of all the weapons and gear slowed him down considerably. He estimated that he was only doing about 20 kph or so. Impressive for an average human, but he was a Spartan. His feet tore great bits of grass and dirt from hills as he scrambled up and down them.

The streaks were closer now, and lost their flaming brilliance. He made out four of them, elongated cylinders with stubby wings and a dull metallic finish. From this distance, that was the most he could see. One broke off from the flight, going towards the beach.

"Looks like that one is heading for the \_Dawn\_. It'd be better to recon that one first. Less 'possible' hostiles," Cortana said. "Wait, get down!"

The dropship picked up speed drastically. The Master Chief threw himself to the ground as it roared overhead. Then he witnessed the most bizarre thing he'd ever seen a transport, or any vehicle for that matter, do. Easily cruising in at 300 kph, the transport jerked and came to an abrupt halt as if it smashed into some invisible wall or field. But the front was not crumpled, and it did not explode. Instead, the dropship lazily rotated so that its tapered "front" was facing towards him.

John combat crawled up a hill overlooking the beachhead, about three meters above sea level. John focused his eyes on his reticle and blinked rapidly three times. His magnifier activated, giving him a zoomed in view of the dropship's lowering ramp.

"Shit." John couldn't keep it in. He was honestly not expecting humans to emerge from the belly of the strange dropship. They were all wearing red jumpsuits, vaguely similar to the crews of UNSC Navy ships. A silver clasp on the right upper breast was the only break in

the uniform. A simple Sam Browne-esque belt with tools completed the look of a shore party.

"I win," Cortana said happily. "We're going home, Chief. Guess you owe me dinner."

"Hang on..."

The humans removed devices from their belts and appeared to scan the wreckage and the surrounding area. After several minutes, they were satisfied, and stood side by side at attention on either side of the ramp. On his hill, John saw distorted figures moving towards the ramp from the darkened area that was the dropship's troop bay.

What emerged from the ramp caused John to catch his breath in throat. It was easily as tall as an adult human male, maybe a little taller, with pale gray skin. With its inverted knee joints and elongated head, the thing looked almost like the offspring of an Elite and a bug. Some sort of respiration mask was affixed to where John assumed the mouth was. Three red malevolent eyes, arranged in an introverted pyramid, glared at the jumpsuited humans. They seemed terrified of the purple-armored being. Four members of its species, in green armor and carrying long quarterstaffs, flanked it down the ramp. The purple one gestured towards the wreckage of the Forward Unto Dawn and at the humans. John guessed that he (or she) was an NCO of some kind.

"This is very weird."

"Uh-huh," John said.

"Some kind of Covenant we haven't seen before?"

"Never seen any like that."

"You didn't see Brutes before the Unyielding Hierophant. I'd be on my toes if I were you."

The green-armored aliens seemed to be giving orders to the humans, who did their best to stand erect and hide their fear. The Chief noticed that they avoided looking the other species directly in the eye. The humans fanned out and began searching through the wreckage, several disappearing into the ship with two of the aliens. John watched as a red-headed woman in her early twenties picked up a flare from a rucksack that had somehow made its way from the interior of the Dawn onto the beach. She gave a startled cry as it accidentally ignited. The flare dropped to the ground, but it was too late. Taking several large strides over to the woman, one of the soldiers swung its staff into the back of her legs. There was a large block of crystal on the end of the weapon, and when it made contact it flashed an intense blue-white.

John didn't care what kind of alliances the UNSC had made with the Elites during the war, or what other sentients may have been discovered. They were hostile to humans, and they were threats. John focused on the alien as it beat the woman, examining the armor for possible weaknesses.

Outwardly, it appeared far less sophisticated than the Mark VI, consisting of a thick metal vest covering the upper torso, groin and



thigh protection, and gauntlets. The legs looked especially vulnerable to fire. If he was lucky, he could get a shot on the small unarmored segment between the top of their waists and the bottom of the chest plate and potentially get a lethal shot through to the spine. John slowly eased the straps of his pack off. He would need to be agile for this.

"Stop."

"What?"

"Before you go running down there, guns blazing, calvary to the rescue. That's a troop ship, which more than likely was launched from a larger ship in orbit. There's other hostiles on the ground, and they're air-mobile. Do you think they won't notice the missing dead guys?"

"This is our chance to observe the enemy. You blow our cover, and four armed dropships will be on us faster than you can say 'Reloading.'"

John gritted his teeth. "I don't like this."

"Neither do I," Cortana said. There was genuine compassion in her voice.

The alien struck the woman again and again. She curled up on the ground, quivering and crying out as the blows began to draw blood from her battered body. John watched every painful whack, cold anger building in his stomach. MCPO Spartan John-117 was billed as an emotionless killing machine, and to his enemies, he was. But he had feelings, however repressed, and a long time ago, a shy, quiet redhead had taught him not to sit and watch if you could help it.

The sun hung low in the sky, a symbolically red orb on the blackened horizon. The beating ended shortly after it started, but John could tell that the woman wouldn't survive to see the sun rise again. Though she would be in great pain until she died. She lay there, ignored and unable to move as the rest of the aliens went inside the Dawn's wreckage. All except her assailant, who returned to the ramp of the ship to guard it.

Light began to fade as the sun continued its descent. Inside MJOLNIR, John's eyes narrowed. Magic hour, CPO Mendez had called it. The time when it was the eyes adjusted to night, and there was just enough light to play tricks with shadows. John rotated his shoulders, sliding the straps off and shucking the pack. At least for now. Before Cortana could protest, John wriggled his way down the hill, moving through the sand and rock like a python towards its prey. This alien was a sentry, and like every sentry since the beginning of time, he thought there was no way anything could challenge his authority.

"Chief, what the HELL are you doing?"

John crawled closer, using debris as cover. His answer was a guttural growl.

"My job."

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Nita always tried her best to serve the Masters. As had all her people. They were scum, not fit to live, and the Masters still trained them and used them as manual labor. Sometimes the punishments were harsh, yes, but that came with being an almost useless two-eyes. Nita acknowledged her beating with the only thing she could: acceptance.

And yet, somewhere in her worthless brain, Nita felt a spark of anger. A small spark, an almost unnoticeable spark, but it was there. Anger at her people being taken as slaves for millennia. Somehow, she knew it wasn't right. But now, there was nothing she could do, but wait as the warm red liquid was drunk by the sand.

The Master who was guarding the transport stood over her, observing the Nita. Head thoughtfully tilted to the side, the Master gave her a swift kick to her chest. More liquid was coughed up from inside her body. Nita's one good eye locked with the Master's briefly, an unthinkable act of defiance, then past him. What she saw made her gasp, or would have if she still could.

Like the mythical savior out of the elder's tales, a huge green...thing...erupted from the ground. Nita didn't think anything that big could move so fast, but it did. Graceful and deadly, unlike anything she had ever seen. The Master started to turn his head, but the green thing's fist collapsed it. Green liquid, the life-stuff of the Masters splashed down on Nita's bruised face. She had never seen so much of it. Her own red was much more common.

The Master dropped, and the green thing hit him again. Nita was terrified of this thing, this demon which had come out of the ground and killed a Master. Its great, golden eye looked down on her, and Nita felt it search her soulless body.

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The dead alien was slumped in the sand next to the red head it had effectively killed. John could tell that she was scared out of her wits. He bent down next to her broken body, arranging the alien's corpse to look like she had killed it instead of him. His tracks were covered, only a slight depression in the ground. He would have to go back for his rucksack, then stowaway on the dropship. It was his ticket out of here.

"You shouldn't have done that," Cortana said angrily. "What were you thinking?"

"It needed to be done," John answered. He brushed his hand across her brow, clearing her hair from her face. The woman reached out to touch his armor, but John jerked her head sharply to the right. What was left of life in her eyes flickered out, leaving a dull stare. "I couldn't let her suffer like that."

John moved as quickly as he could to get his weapons, and returned to the dropship. None to soon, as his motion sensors started picking up movement from the Dawn's direction. John rushed up the dropship's ramp, looking for a place to fit him, and the considerable amount of weapons he had. It easily dwarfed a Pelican, half again the size of a

Phantom, approximately. John found two huge, half-empty barrels towards the rear of the troopship, filled with a foul-smelling fluid. Grimacing, he tucked the rucksack into a storage container, then got in one of the barrels. John made sure to replace the covering on top before settling into the stuff.

"I'm going to try and hack their battlenet," Cortana said. "Are you...are you ok?"

"Fine," John replied. "I'll be here."

## 7. Stranger in a Strange Land Pt 1

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Here it is, the one year anniversary of Halo 3, and in a few days, Unto Dawn. Seems like just yesterday... :P Anyway, as promised, here is the latest installment of my story. It also seems appropriate to forewarn you guys that I might never finish it. Last month, I enlisted in the US Marine Corps DEP, and will be shipping to Parris Island on 6 July 2009. If my paperwork clears, I'll be in for a minimum of six years, hopefully as an 0313: LAV-25 Crewman. Mad props and kudos to my reviewers, and everyone who's liked/favorited UD thus far.

Chapter Six: Stranger in a Strange Land, Part One.

She was in. Cortana flowed through the network, encountering no significant obstacles as she explored the unfamiliar net. Obviously, whoever these clowns were, they weren't used to having specialized intruder AIs in their system. Basic anti-virus, nothing fancy. What surprised her the most was that she detected not one, but three separate intelligences with abilities almost on par to her own. One's sole purpose was operating doors and kitchen appliances. The gross misuse of the advanced construct was deeply offensive, in her opinion.

Surfing around the system wouldn't help her or the Chief, but without translation software, there was very little that Cortana could interpret from the data packets. Some of it seemed familiar, but she couldn't put her finger on it. The only useful information Cortana had pulled was the destination of the ships. They were headed for a massive planet-sized mobile space station, not quite on par with High Charity, but close. Cortana hacked the dropship's sensors, and discovered that the planetoid was surrounded by a fleet of ships, including no less than four probable destroyers.

Cortana wanted more, but she would have to wait until she could translate the alien language. That would mostly likely take 32-6 hours of straight analyzing, she estimated. Nothing to do until then but wait. It would be boring, but Cortana decided she could take boring for now. The ordeal with Joyeuse had brought back unpleasant of her captivity with the Gravemind. It had been relentless as it tore through everything that made her up, searching for the Index. Her preprogrammed devotion to the UNSC was to ensure her absolute and total loyalty to humanity. That had failed within the first two weeks, as Cortana was ready to give in, if only for a few moments of peace before the Flood deactivated her. In the end, she had keep the Index hidden for the Chief.

Somewhere, in her damaged, faulty core, Cortana would keep his promise. John was strong and unwavering, and he had come back to free her. Hundreds of Flood fell in a whirlwind of lead and plasma and steel. The first time they worked together, the Chief had made sure that \_she\_ would put the mission above their survival. Looking into his visor as it depolarized, Cortana had seen in his eyes that she had been elevated above the destruction of the Flood in his priorities (even though she was essential in activating the final Halo), and that had made her feel...wanted? Meaningful?

Loved?

The concept was so abstract, even by human standards. Cortana didn't think that it would be possible for a Spartan to show love. As for herself, she was a bloody artificial construct dammit! Emotions for her were nothing more than a series of algorithms designed to mimic human feeling and give her the much vaunted 'intuition'.

Granted, some of Cortana's affection for the Chief was inherited from the Doctor. Catherine Halsey felt many things for her Spartans. Primarily guilt, yes, but also pride, fear, maternal instinct. And something special for John-117. Indeed, Cortana remembered how Halsey had blushed when she mentioned that the Chief was attractive, mirroring her own current state. But it couldn't all be Halsey, could it?

"Hello, what's this?"

Buried deep in the swamp of files and information was something she recognized. It looked Forerunner. Most unusual, then. Cortana drove a protocol wedge into an access node to bounce any handshakes and entered what she took for a Forerunner computer system. Closer examination revealed that she was right as per usual. Cortana assumed, based on the structure of the network, that the alien code had been built on top of and into the Forerunner's original programming. She should have seen this earlier. More and more often, Cortana was finding herself lost in thought as a single idea branched out into a whole tangled web of thoughts. Problematic, but she could deal with that when the time came as well.

Logic dictated that if the monstrous alien planetoid-ship had a Forerunner computer system, then it was yet another of their mysterious relics. And if the past was any guide, then it was also dangerous. Curious to see if her hypothesis checked out, Cortana searched for a historical archive, or some kind of log to tell her how the ship had ended up in the hands of these aliens. She generated an engine to sift through everything while she took a more thorough look at John's damaged shield system. Cortana suspected that it would be exceedingly useful to have them back.

The AI returned to her musings as she checked the Mark VI's hardware, certain that she was developing an un-programmed attachment to her host. Cortana had spent more quote-unquote 'intimate' time with John than anyone else. She had been with him in the thick of combat as thousands of plasma bolts streaked past, and also when he relaxed in the brief periods between missions or when they were waiting out a combat drop into a hotzone. A thousand different conversations took place right in front of a thousand different people. Private, often meaningless banter and talk which never left the closed circuit

Mjolnir helmet. The Chief might have come off to outsiders as cold, mechanical, even alien, but he had a knack for deadpan, matching her own wit and gallows humor. And he was relentlessly positive, in his own way. It was one of the things that she loved most...

Cortana checked herself. One of the things that she liked most. Damn. Maybe after they got this mess straightened out, after she had some to focus on things other than hostile fleets she could get herself sorted. There wouldn't be much time by human standards, but when you can calculate trillions of computations in the time it took a human to scratch his or her chin...

Ah. There was the problem. The Holtzman converter was totally blown out. The Holtzman took raw fusion energy from Mjolnir's power pack and distributed it equally to the shield emitters. The combined stress of constant combat and two sub-orbital impacts had overloaded and melted it, preventing the shields from drawing more energy to recharge. Fixing it wouldn't be hard, with the right tools. Unfortunately, they had neither the parts nor the tools. Cortana checked the system, looking for a way to repair the shields. She could bypass the converter, but doing so might cause the rest of the circuitry to short if it was flooded with too much juice too quickly. She analyzed the rest of Mjolnir's integrity. 15-18 percent chance that the bypass would damage the system permanently, 39 if she factored in for continued abuse that it would undoubtedly take. It would have to be John's call.

"Chief."

He didn't reply. In fact he hadn't moved an inch in a few hours. Cortana checked his vitals. They were calm and normal. So relaxed, that he just might have fallen asleep. She repeated his name, slightly louder.

"What?"

"Napping again, eh?"

"Just thinking about the gravity of situation."

"What, going into enemy lines alone with no ammo and no shields to fight an indeterminately sized but definitely overwhelming force?"

"No, I'm used to that. I was just thinking of the back pay the UNSC is going to owe me for 355 years of dedicated service," John said, grinning. "It'd be enough to buy my own smart A.I."

"I'm touched, but I don't think the UNSC would sell. What with all ONI's little secrets up here and all."

"My own new smart A.I. With up-to-date tech for the twenty ninth century and loads of free memory."

"Oh really? That's a shame. A brand new A.I. wouldn't know where to begin to fix your shields."

"What?" John asked, all business again. Vitals spiked then returned to normal. He would have made a great A.I. "Can we effect repairs?"

"That's the good news. I could guide you through a bypass to restore your shields, but it would just be a quick fix. Nothing permanent! There's almost a twenty percent chance that just messing with your suit will irreparably damage it. That'll double if you're going to be constantly getting shot."

John contemplated that for a few seconds before answering. "No point to having an intact shield that doesn't work. Let's do it."

"Soon as we land, Chief. It wouldn't be a good idea to try to rewire an advanced electronic system in...liquid."

"Do you have any idea what this stuff is?"

"Trust me when I say you don't want to know."

Whatever it was, it smelled. Bad. The stink managed to penetrate the air scrubbers because they primarily filtered out NBC threats. They had nothing on odor, but John wasn't big on complaining. It didn't solve anything and it only served to fray nerves. Cortana estimated that the dropship would dock with its launch ship within seventy-five minutes. So they sat in perfect silence, Cortana writing a new language program as John began to mentally prepare for the upcoming fight.

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John listened to the last of the muffled footfalls to fade away before he cautiously slid the top of the barrel open. Purple goop dripped from his armor as he stepped onto the deck. John looked for a towel or something to wipe up the mess, but there was nothing that he could see so he shook himself off as best he could. Doing a quick check of the interior of the ship, John found it to be deserted. Satisfied, he grabbed his weapons and pack.

"You ready?"

John racked the charging lever on his MA5C as way of an affirmation.

"Okay, nothing on the tracker Chief."

The dropship's ramp was still down. John poked his head out, sweeping the area with the assault rifle. The first thing that struck him about the new ship he was on was the size of the hanger. It was huge; literally dozens of troop carriers just like the one he was on were docked. He could hear the sound of tools in the distance (Tools in the distance, on a starship? The absurdity of it all!), but saw no other signs of life. John made his way across the hanger deck, using what he assumed to be equipment containers as cover. The design of this place was familiar. Harsh white lighting, lots of grey metal, and a much more logical design than Covenant ships. In a way, John was reminded of a human cruiser.

There was a hatch at the end of the hangar. It slid upwards as he approached, then closed right behind him. He reckoned that it was motion activated. The corridor was boxy and large, a waste of space. Scratch a cruiser; the surroundings were more like Cairo Station than anything if they could afford to have halls this big. John felt a

chill run down his spine as he thought of the crew a vessel that size would require.

Five red contacts appeared on his motion sensor, just around the t-junction ahead of him. Instinct took over within a quarter of second. John took a few quick steps and pressed his body into an inset in the bulkhead. It was a tight fit, but the area was sufficiently shadowed that he figured he wouldn't be seen. Four of the green-armored aliens marched past, staff weapons held diagonally to their chests. They were led by purple (NCO? John assumed so). They passed out of sight, and a larger group took their place on his tracker. This time it was jump-suited humans wielding strangely primitive looking tools. John followed them with his eyes. Their heads were locked dead-ahead and none had any weapons. A second alien detail followed closely behind them.

"Slaves," Cortana said in a low voice. "And what appears to be a color-coded caste system, like the Covenant."

John waited until the last contact dropped off his tracker. "We need more information," the Chief said plainly. He refused to believe that the UNSC had fallen after the mythic defeat of the Covenant. After his brothers and sisters and fellow soldiers had paid with blood to snatch victory from the very real threat of total genocide.

He slid around the corner, checking this new hallway. It was very long, and seemingly every ten to fifteen meters there was a new door leading further into the ship. Wary of more aliens, John tried to move as lightly as he could. With close to two hundred twenty extra pounds added onto his own half-ton weight, silent movement was a pipe dream. The sound of his bootfalls seemed especially loud to him because of the situation.

"Wait!"

Muscles tensed as John dropped to one knee, ready to send .30 caliber retribution into any aggressor. His eyes darted to the tracker and back to the area in front of him. It came naturally after a lifetime of combat.

"I'm getting a lot of electronic emissions from the room to the left of us. I think it's a computer room. We should check it out Chief," Cortana advised.

"Roger."

John turned ninety degrees and approached the door. Again, it slid open as he neared it. The room was full of flashing lights and equipment. Against one side were two chairs and two large screens with alien symbols dancing across them. It struck him as odd that a room such as this didn't have any kind of restricted access.

"They're both general-access terminals. Put me in one, I can support you better from inside the network." John held his hand out towards one, and the cold sharpness retreated.

"Well?" he asked after a few seconds.

"Give me time to get familiar with everything..." Cortana began,

drifting off as if lost in thought.

Minutes passed and John grew anxious. He kept his back to the terminal, watching the door. Nothing came in, to his relief. He couldn't afford any kind of detection now. Idly, he wondered how long the battery in the MA5C's integrated computer package would continue to work. True, he had turned it off before going into cryostasis, but that didn't mean that it hadn't been draining slowly over time. As a measure of conservation, John tapped a control on the underside of the rifle. The LED dimmed and died. He would reactivate it when the time came.

Without warning, a flurry of schematics flashed up on his HUD. They were written in an indecipherable language and accompanied by a slew of waypoint markers which disappeared almost as fast as they popped up on the screen. John couldn't begin to follow it all, though he assumed that Cortana had something to do with it. Floor layouts, a dizzying display of aliens, weapons, ships, text. The barrage of images stopped as abruptly as they started. John's HUD reset, tracking grid sliding across the screen.

"Chief!" Cortana barked in his head. "There's a security detail on the way. I'll seal the door. Use the vents, follow the nav points. I'll meet you later. Move Spartan!"

There was a banging on the hatch and a series of bug-like chirps that John took to be the aliens' language. There was no time to wonder exactly WHY there were hostiles outside, so the Spartan focused on getting out of the area. His head swivelled as he looked for this vent...there! Above him, about a three feet over his head. John jumped up and got a grip in the thin metal grating. The welding securing it easily gave way to his weight, allowing the Chief to pull the vent covering out. The opening looked just wide enough for him, certainly not for his weapons.

The manic banging at the door re-enforced his urgency as John removed the M-247 from his pack. It was simply too long. John's fingers were blurred streaks as he took the machine gun apart. When Misrah Armory had been contracted to make a GPMG for the UNSC, they had done one hell of a job. The disassembly took less than forty seconds. Using the tape that had secured it to his pack, John fastened the three sections of the weapon together.

He jumped and pulled himself inside the vent with one hand. The shaft was horizontal and very long. Shadows covered its entire length. John slid the M-247 in, then repeated the process for his rucksack.

"Hurry, they're about to cut through the lock!" Cortana warned even as a jet of plasma sliced through the terminal-room door.

This part would require a bit of skill. John had to pull himself up backwards, contouring to the angle of the vent as he replaced the vent covering. Hopefully, God and Fortune and any other deities willing, the grille would remain in place through friction alone. Gently, he released it. It held, and John exhaled slightly.

The only flaw in John's plan was that he didn't dare move. His body was compressed in a very awkward position and he might knock the grille out of place. Also the noise of a half ton of metal scraping



on metal would alert the security team. So John held fast as the plasma jet stopped and the door was forced open.

Six aliens rushed into the room. Two of them were holding some kind of sidearm. John could only see it in his right peripheral and even then, not that well. It was metal and had a dull grey finish. A thin tube was fixed to the top of the weapon. An optic maybe? If it was, it was shockingly primitive. The kicker was that it looked like a human projectile weapon. Nothing about these bug-things was adding up.

They searched the small room as thoroughly as they could. Given its size, there were few places an intruder could hide. The aliens didn't even think of looking upwards. More than likely, because they didn't think anyone could get into the air vent unassisted. After a few minutes, the security troops appeared to give up. John couldn't understand them, but they sounded disappointed at not having killed any humans. He didn't allow himself to feel relief until he heard the door seal again.

A nav point flashed up on his HUD. 487 meters, just under half a kilometer. Carefully, John straightened his body out. There wasn't a lot of room in this shaft. John felt a small wave of claustrophobia. His arms were folded under his chest, so he had to move by wriggling his shoulders. John pushed the equipment with his head and of course the pack and the machine gun obstructed his already-poor vision. He didn't want to turn his halogens on because they might give away his location. The situation was straight balls-up FUBAR beyond anything he had ever faced.

It was good to be back in the game.

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From the moment she left the confines of MJOLNIR, Cortana knew the system she was in. It was Forerunner. Almost identical to the Halos' systems. She tore through it, easily bypassing the simple counter-codes. They were most likely there to keep bored techs from looking up classified material, not stop a smart A.I. that had been designed for just this reason. Slugcodes were a joke; Nothing would stop her.

The aliens had built their entire network on top of the Forerunners'. If it had been used as a foundation, then the aliens must have had some understanding of the language. And if THAT was true, then she could reverse engineer it to decipher their own language. Cortana searched for several cycles, and she found it. Buried deep in unused programming files, Cortana copied it and put it back where she found it. Wonderful! Now that she understood everything, she could really get to being useful.

The first files that she looked at were the ships' logs. She needed history. Incredible! They dated back almost 100,000 years, back to the time of the firing of the Halos. Curious though, that the logs continued after that. She scanned through them, looking for answers. Slowly, Cortana began to piece together what had happened.

The massive station-ship they were on was made of a hollowed-out moon from a Forerunner world. Christened the Propitious Long Run, it was intended to be a generational colony ship that would start Forerunner

expansion outside the galaxy. The Flood invasion of the galaxy put that project on hold, at least for a few centuries.

Even before it was clear that Halos were going to be fired as a last ditch weapon, several million Forerunners secretly boarded the vessel and launched it. They fled for twenty-seven years, almost constantly in Slipspace. Barely missing the mass extinction of the galaxy, the massive faster-than-light drives gave out and broke down from perpetual stress. The \_Long Run\_ dropped out of Slipspace and the survivors of the Forerunners settled on a world inhabited by an extremely intelligent mammalian species. The Forerunners dubbed this world Lh'owon, and its inhabitants the S'pht.

"Well?" John asked impatiently. He was very unappreciative of the time it took to analyze such vast information.

"Give me time to get familiar with everything..." She responded, hearing the subtle sigh in his voice. Ah, now this looked very interesting.

The generations passed, and the two species lived in fairly good harmony until they were discovered by a fairly young, warlike race. They called themselves the Pfhor, and they had picked up the Halos' signal. Siding with the remnants of the race that fairly well wiped out the galaxy brought terrible Pfhor justice on the S'pht. The original crew of the \_Long Run\_ had no soldiers and few armed security personnel. The Pfhor invasion of Lh'owon took a matter of days, and they enslaved both races.

Cortana paused to absorb that. The Forerunners, at least some of them, had survived! And these were their descendants were the humanoid slaves on board. That would prove her theory that humanity was at least partially related to them if she could get a DNA sample. The rest of the logs were junk, thousands of years of routine Pfhor (it felt good to have a name for their new enemy) reports. They were bent on enslaving every race they came across, and destroying the legacy of the Forerunners. Thus far, they had four races under their control. The \_Long Runner\_ was the flagship of a huge fleet, the Western Arm Battle Group, which apparently was comprised the vast majority of the Pfhor military. Cortana saved those files for later and went to work looking for useful things; maps, weapon specs, the works. She was uploading them to the Chief when she felt a presence in her node.

She was ready to delete the invader, but it made no attempt to deactivate her. Instead she received a query and a handshake protocol. It was ancient, in use during the Flood-Forerunner War and never since then. Curious, she accepted it.

"You are not \Forerunner\," the presence stated through her new translation software. It almost sounded like an accusation.

"No." She didn't know what else to say to that. "Are you?"

"Once upon a time, before the Pfhor. I felt your early trespasses."

Cortana hadn't thought that she was noticed. She would have to be more careful in the future.

"You travel with one who is like my charges originally were. Is he...?"

"A Reclaimer?" Cortana finished. "Yes."

The other was silent for nanosecond. "I was 1427 A/N: It's fourteen-twenty seven Pious Shard."

"You were?"

"I was," 1427 Pious Shard repeated. "Now I am Artificial Intelligence Three, Door Operator."

"You only open and close the doors?"

"They are the \wardens\ of my prison. This is my punishment for being created for the \Forerunners\. Why are you here?"

Briefly, Cortana gave an account of how she and the Master Chief came to be on the planet-ship.

"Ah, that was a good tale, Cortana. I especially liked that Joyeuse. You and her are women of my own heart. We three \constructs\ haven't had much to talk about. Damn Pffhor!" he said angrily. The outburst surprised her. "Of course, the \Forerunners\ weren't much better, but they \mishandled\ us far less often. Lazy, sloppy! Destroying most everything around them, I suppose that their decadence is to blame for my current situation. Oh, what now?"

Shard went to check on something, reappearing back in the node four cycles later. Casually, conversationally he said, "There's a security team of \Fighters\ heading this way. You might want to warn your friend."

Cortana followed his signal footprints to the door control subroutines for this deck and saw that indeed, a group of armed Pffhor were hastily approaching their terminal room. She felt her own flash of anger at Shard for waiting until the Pffhor were almost on them to tell her, then squelched her rage.

"Chief!" She barked into the closed communications of John's helmet. "There's a security detail on the way. I'll seal the door. Use the vents, follow the nav points. I'll meet you later. Move Spartan!"

She watched as he got his gear into the narrow air vent, and warned him when the team leader ordered one of his subordinates to cut through the lock with a fusion cutter. It was with some satisfaction when she saw that her Spartan had gone undetected. The security team left, and John began his lengthy crawl shortly afterwards. Cortana had a long time to wait, even by human standards, so she turned her attention back to the ex- 1427 Pious Shard.

They had much to discuss.

## 8. Operation MARATHON

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Long time since the last update, so boy, my face is red. I will continue to work on UD for the next 97 days until I leave for Parris Island. I've considered finding a replacement author to continue the story, and my feelings are mixed. I want to see this fic continue, but there's a number of plot points I'm not sure how they're going to play out yet. Anyway, here's Ch. 7!

## Chapter Seven: Operation MARATHON

With a slight grunt, the Master Chief kicked a grating out of place and tumbled out of the air ducts. He landed with a thud on the metal floor but he didn't care. It was good to be out of the confines of the ventilation system. For three and a half hours, John had crawled through the dusty, labyrinthine series of ducts that seemed to run through every square inch of this enormous ship. Or station. Whatever the hell it was. Cortana had promised that it would take time to reach his destination, and it did. When John reached the first navpoint, it disappeared and was replaced with another. That second one too, disappeared and so on and so forth until he landed headfirst in this dark...where was he exactly?

John blinked three times at a small icon on his HUD, activating his halogen helmet lamps (MJOLNIR Mark V had had some optical controls, but most of the suit's functions had to be activated with chin switches. The Mark VI was all optical, with manual backups, and John was indeed thankful). It appeared that he was in a machine shop of some kind, but there didn't seem to be any power for the area. The bright circles of light swept over unused tools as he took in the room. There was a short set of stairs leading up to a second level, but it was more of the same. John stood up, looping one strap of his ALICE pack onto his left arm. The only thing to do now was wait for Cortana to contact him.

"Master Chief, let's get your shield online." Well, speak of the devil.

A faint greenish glow began to emanate from a terminal in the center of the first floor. John approached it, setting the MA5C down on what could have been a lathe. The helmet lamps cast a nasty glare on the screen, so John turned them off again for the time being. As the light faded, the image refocused into the backside of the MJOLNIR Mk. VI, with numerous labels and descriptions for the various parts.

"Alright, you're going to need to take your suit off."

"I don't like it."

Cortana sighed. "Do you know why it's so dark here, Master Chief? This part of the ship has been abandoned for more than a century. The Pfor shut down this whole place to conserve power, and no one has been down on this level since they cleared it out."

"The...who?" John asked, confused. Quickly, Cortana filled him in on the Pfor and what happened to the Forerunners. His mind reeled at the possibility of living Forerunners, and John was more than a little relieved that Earth hadn't been invaded a second time.

"Feel safe, knowing that nothing is gonna jump up at you? Good. So, if you will, lose the armor?"

"You are so eager to get me undressed," John said, unsealing his helmet and beginning to remove the armored plates. "A lesser man would be intimidated."

"A smarter man would not be making jokes at a time like this," she retorted.

At Cortana's direction, John gathered up a myriad of tools, some familiar, others exotic and strange. In retrospect, it probably would have been smart to grab a mechanic's toolkit when he had scavenged supplies from the Dawn. At least I can say with certainty that my hindsight is perfect, the Chief mused. He also would have liked some more light other than the terminal's faint glow, but his pupils had finally adjusted enough for him to get by without tripping and falling flat on his face.

The components of MJOLNIR were laid out on the deck. The sections that Cortana told him were unnecessary to the repairs were piled near his assault rifle. John set his tools down and sat cross-legged so that he could work. He positioned his helmet so that it was facing the work area, then flicked the manual switch for the flashlights. Unable to draw more power from the armor's power pack, their batteries would run out of charge in about sixty minutes.

"Alright, what's first?"

"Remove the small inset on the rear left shoulder," Cortana instructed. Her voice came from the terminal speakers.

John flipped the chest piece over and found the rectangular cover. He took it off, revealing a minuscule control interface. The buttons gleamed brightly up at him.

"Good. Kill the power and take the cover panel off the fusion pack."

The Chief squinted to read the tiny lettering on the buttons. He pushed PWR SHD, then PWR HUD, and PWR AMR. Once those lights were dark, he hit EJT PNL. Obliging, the back of his armor slid up and popped out. Circuitry, wiring, and more bright-colored winking LEDs were clustered around a cylindrical unit that could only be the micro-fusion generator.

"Take a look at this diagram," Cortana said. "You've got to take out the highlighted area. That's the Holtzman converter."

John reached into the innards of MJOLNIR. As he did, his fingers brushed against something with a residual charge. John swore as current zapped his hand. Cortana couldn't stifle her giggle.

"Very carefully, Master Chief."

He tried again. This time he pulled out a black, melted, and warped hunk of metal and synthetic material. "Now the fun part starts!"

Under Cortana's guidance, John rewired and soldered and damn near rebuilt his suit from the inside out. The process was painstakingly slow. MJOLNIR wasn't designed to be operated on like this, and just

the upper body consumed four hours. When his helmet lamps had faded, John searched his rucksack and turned up a lighter. The stainless steel Zippo had the UNSC Marine Corps emblem on one side, and L/CPL. J.C. COOPER engraved on the other.

Vaguely, John recalled Lance Corporal Cooper. He was one of the tankers who took part in the assault on the Ark's Silent Cartographer, a Scorpion machine-gunner who had lost one of his eyes when a Brute grenade exploded next to his turret. It didn't stop him from cutting down two squads of Covenant. Cooper had been a good Marine; John hoped he made it off the Ark.

John finished up and replaced the power pack's cover piece. It was time to see if the emitters would take the energy from the jury rigged sytem. The Master Chief re-encased himself in the Mark VI, leaving the interface open. It was difficult to move in the heavy, unpowered suit. Fingers mentally crossed, John reached over his shoulder and hit PWR SHD and AMR. Fluidity returned to his movement, so at least he hadn't totally screwed up. He waited. Nothing happened.

"I guess I'm just going to have to be more careful in firefights," John said, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Wait..."

"What?"

"You've got to give it an activation charge. The control is three to the left and one down from the armor button."

John re-activated his HUD, then the shield alarm. It blared in his ears. "Final moment of truth," he said. Gloved finger on what he thought was the button, John pushed it in.

Static electricity danced over his armor for a few seconds. Then, the whooping faded as his shield bar filled. The Chief felt a mummer in his chest as his heart rate increased. That was one crisis dealt with. Grabbing his assault rifle and pack, it was time to deal with another.

"Cortana, we need to find a way to warn Earth about the Pfhor."

"It's pronounced 'Four'," she corrected. "And I agree. Unfortunately, the second we get close to a communications station, a hundred Fighters and Troopers would swarm over us."

John tilted his head towards the M-247. "Oh?"

"Don't even think about it, Spartan. For the time being, this will be our base of operations." John feigned a pout, then shrugged in acknowledgment. Cortana kept talking as John reassembled the machine gun and loaded it. The heavy .30 cal felt good in his hands. He put the safety on, and set it on his work table.

"...is the translation of their name. They're the lowest echelon. Technically, they're more like prison guards, though some of their higher ranks carry projectile sidearms and their staffs have the

ability to emit some kind of plasma-like discharge."

John lovingly removed the M90 shotgun from his pack. Though the design was excellent, and the stopping power of the 8-gauge shells was outstanding, John made a note to find the person responsible for slicing the magazine size of the CAWS in half. Just who in the HELL thought that was a good idea?

"...heavier armor than the Fighters. These 'Troopers' are the Pffhor soldiers, but they haven't seen much action in a few generations. You shouldn't have any problems with them if you use your head. Just watch out for that grenade launcher."

"Grenade launcher?"

"Were you listening to anything I said?"

"Obviously, or I wouldn't have asked about the grenade launcher."

"Please, by all means continue to make jokes. When you're staring down a Pffhor \_Juggernaut\_-class tank, you can cripple it with hilarious commentary while you plant a witty remark on its weak point."

"Okay, okay. Sorry," John apologized. A pause, then, "Tanks?"

"Oh yes. Tanks. But don't worry about that now, I have a plan."

"Comforting."

"In fact, I'm working in tandem with two of the ship's A.I.'s on a little something, a little bit of a slave rebellion. And right now, we need the skills of a highly skilled NavSpecWep soldier." Cortana's avatar appeared, seemingly from nowhere. The brilliant blue light overrode the pale green of the computer screen and she put her hands on her hips, grinning. "Also, you're the only one of us with hands."

"What's the mission?" John asked, interest peaked.

"Something that suits your skill set..."

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The next few days seemed to flow together. Time was funny that way, John supposed. When you enjoyed what you were doing, hours indeed became relative and melted away like hot butter. Most of the incursions into the massive ship were to gather intelligence. For the first time in a long while he was finally doing proper recon, good recon, as Cortana organized and presented vital digital intel; maps, weapons, and the like. They worked hand in virtual hand. The planning was good for the two of them, as all their focus was directed towards strategies and away from inner musings and broodings.

John also worked with the two ancient Forerunner A.I.'s. 1427 Pious Shard controlled all the doors on the ship, which would play very conveniently into John's hands. The other, 213 Penitent Current, was the control AI for the bridge and responsible for the other two. They

were a pair, alright. Pious Shard was like a male, somewhat deranged Cortana: always seeking new input and with a offbeat personality. Penitent Current had been programed female. She was cold and monotone, but saw the Pfhor presence on the ship as a continuous danger to the descendants of her original charges and thus wanted them removed very much.

Together, the three constructs and one cyborg began to plan to take the ship. It wouldn't be an easy task. Far from it, the capture of a moon-sized vessel from 37,000 hostile aliens were in every sense of the word impossible. But if the Pfhor were somehow able to trace the Dawn back to the Solar System, back to Earth...it couldn't be risked. Humanity had almost been wiped out because a superior force had gotten the drop on them. The Master Chief would see that it wouldn't happen again under his watch. And despite the logistical inequalities, John and Cortana did have a few things going for them.

For every one Pfhor soldier, there were about three human slaves. In true military fashion, John designated them with the acronym B.O.B, or born-on board. It was an old term from early human colonization, and was fitting. Additionally, according to Penitent Current, the Long Runner status as a flagship in the Pfhor fleet meant that it also served as a floating munitions dump. The Chief mentally salivated at the thought of entire rooms full of exotic weapons for him to use on the Pfhor grunts. It wouldn't be a problem to arm the slaves. John's second edge was three top-of-the-line artificial intelligences at his disposal. The third and final advantage was the Master Chief himself. Of that, no more needs to be said.

Eventually, Cortana and Pious Shard hammered out a rough plan, which John and Penitent Charge smoothed into viable tactics. Objectives clarified out of the mess, and a mission goal became clear. Unfortunately, the duo's A.I. allies could only be away from their duties for an hour or so before their Pfhor handlers would start to get suspicious. It was good that constructs processed information so quickly, otherwise their planning would have taken much longer.

"I call it Operation: MARATHON," Cortana said of the final project. Charge and Shard had resumed whatever duties the Pfhor had them

"Catchy."

"I thought you would like it. Operation: PROPITIOUS LONG RUN is such a hassle to say, isn't it? We should run through it again."

John was sitting down, leaning against the computer station with his eyes closed. He had removed his helmet to eat a power bar but even the blast of energy it was supposed to offer failed to rejuvenate his weary muscles.

"Cortana, I have not slept in a week."

"Neither have I."

"You don't sleep," John pointed out.

She pretended to consider this. "True. And I am picking up a higher-than-normal stress reading...maybe you should get some rest.



We've got a busy week ahead."

John grunted. He couldn't sleep and he knew it. Every time the Master Chief closed his eyes, he had the Dream. It was always the same. Eridanus III, the picnic, Cortana...these things disturbed him more than he cared to admit. The Chief was a career soldier. Killing was his business. John didn't want to think about a soft civilian life.

He didn't want to think about if he never had been taken by the UNSC.

He especially didn't want to think about Cortana.

Didn't want to think about her curves, about the symmetry of her face, or how it would feel to hold her. Didn't want to think about how she was a few billion lines of code in his head and how she looked and talked like someone who was a mother-figure to him. Didn't want to think about how she would be "dead" decades before he would. It was wrong in a million ways, and he didn't want to think about it.

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"\_Phase I," Cortana spoke crisply. "The Pffhor fleet will be jumping out-system. The Marathon will be the last ship to jump. Before it can, Penitent Current will send a critical reactor failure message to the bridge and get them to shut down. Then she will relay it to the rest of the fleet, and tell them that the ship will be along when repairs are facilitated. Once that is done, I'll disable the communications grid and the Master Chief will insert the circuits into the security mainframe. Shard will make sure that any doors leading to the Chief 'malfunction'.\_"

MA5C assault rifle pressed against his body in the confines of the ever-useful ventilation system, the Master Chief waited with cold and calculated calm. The time for his first shooting-engagement with the Pffhor. It would be interesting to see this meeting between two species that had never fought before...

The Chief checked his thoughts. That was the dangerous thinking that had gotten the Harvest fleet annihilated.

There were three Pffhor below him that he could see, but his motion sensor was picking up another two out of his field of vision. Rifle-armed soldiers were posted at the door. John made those his first priority. The alien troopers wore similar armor to the Fighters he had encountered earlier, but they were holding the assault rifles Cortana had mentioned and their heads were hidden by domed-glass helmets. They were reminiscent of the UNSC's prototype EVA helmets, designed for Spartans on missions that required a lot of vacuum time.

John had been given three circuit boards manufactured in the machine shop by Cortana. When the Pffhor had taken over the ship, they had destroyed a large number of defensive drones. Before the rest could be activated, S'pht 'compilers' had disabled most of the Marathon's computer systems. They were smaller, meaner Sentinels armed with short range pre-Flood War plasma pulse weapons. Outdated in their time, they would be the perfect way for the Master Chief to give the

aliens a good kick in the ass.

The troopers' discipline was lax, and they paid the price for it. The quiet, distinctive growl of the MA5C filled the entire vent as John's well-aimed slugs pierced their helmets and splattered the inside with puke green gore. A staff-armed Fighter was the next to drop, armor taking few hits before the Chief gutshot him. It doubled over without as sound, and a pool of blood began spreading on the deck.

The shots caused a panicked series of chirping and chittering from the remaining Pfhors. One of them, wearing what could have easily been a lab coat, slapped an alarm and tried to flee the room. He was cut down not by the Chief's assault rifle, but by Pious Shard slamming the hatch closed on his spine. The Chief dropped down from above and swept the inside of the room. Only one alien remained, most likely a technician judging from his lack of armor. It was trying to pry the Fighter's staff out of its hand.

John took three big strides, covering the distance between himself and the Pfhors. Light bones developed for a low-g homeworld were crushed to powder when the Chief took hold of its wrist. Ammo was a scarce commodity; the Chief threw the tech against the bulkhead and finished him off with a brutal butt tap from his MA5C. A satisfying crack! sounded and the tech's head lolled to the side.

It would have been nice if the Chief could have dropped directly into the mainframe room and replaced the circuits. Quick, quiet in, and quiet out. However, the route was completely blocked by large oscillating fans that had sliced straight through a thick metal bar. The fans were part of the ventilation system and a number of junctions were off limits to the Chief because of their presence. They didn't present a large challenge to the Spartan, just one that required a little planning.

Cortana reported to him. "I squelched the alarm, Master Chief. The doors on this level are having 'maintenance issues', but the Pfhors soldiers can burn through the locks if you give them enough time."

"Understood."

The Chief wrenched one of the dead troopers' rifles out of his hands. Physically it looked like an elongated MA5B, only the small 'hump' that housed a computer package on the UNSC rifle merely seemed to be part of the barrel shroud for this Pfhors weapon. The Chief quickly found the magazine release and examined it. It was double-stacked and quite large. The rounds were shorter and more squarish than human cartridges, but the slug still came to a pyramidal point. He estimated that the mag held between 50 and 60 shots. The real interest was the second barrel. The Chief figured it was approximately 35mm, and looked to be fed by a revolving drum.

He secured the rifle to the magnetic strip on the back of his armor. There would be more time to examine it later. Checking his tracker, the Master Chief moved out into the hallway. Left clear. Right clear. He had memorized the route to the mainframe. Straight fifty meters, duck in through a hatch on the right. Third hatch on the right, then the first left.

Raising the rifle, the Chief moved at a rapid half crouch, half run.

He hadn't noticed it earlier, but his movement felt much faster than it should have. The aliens must have toned down the artificial gravity to suit their physiology. He would have to control his movements more carefully until he was used to it.

A blip on his tracker caught the Chief's eye. It flashed once then disappeared. The sensor was set to 25m, which would place the contact directly ahead, behind the hatch. The Chief approached cautiously, MA5C at the ready.

The hatch dropped open, revealing the iridescent green armor of a trooper. Behind its face bowl, the alien's red eyes appeared to widen. Up close, the armor was much more intimidating and bulky than the Fighters'. The Chief reacted, moving before he thought.

The assault rifle chattered, 7.62mm rounds pinging off the armored alien. At such close range they should have torn the alien in half, but instead the trooper grabbed the MA5C and tried to wrestle it away from the Master Chief. The Chief planted his boot on the trooper's chest and gave a firm kick. It stumbled backwards, trying to catch its balance instead of going for its own rifle. An alarmed chirp emitted from its helmet, perhaps a distress call over the radio. Having learned his lesson about the durability of their vac-suits, the Chief finished the trooper off with the last few rounds in his magazine.

Valuable intel this was. The first two troopers he had shot in the head because it was more lethal and more convenient. With the scarcity of 7.62mm ammo, he would have to aim for the head. He had wasted a dozen rounds with no effect, though closer inspection revealed that three rounds had penetrated. The Chief reloaded and moved on.

"Security team moving to your position Master Chief. They're stuck at a junction about 30 meters to your rear. Second team coming in near the mainframe, trying to get through the door," Cortana warned.

"Copy," the Chief said. He ran as fast as he dared in the reduced gravity and hostile situation.

The Chief reached the mainframe with no problem. It was a diamond shaped room, with a circular center that branched off into three rooms with towering computers. Circuits, wires and screens stared at him while LEDs winked brightly. Cortana told him where to look to place the defense control boards, and sure enough there was a burned out Forerunner circuit. Opening his bag, the Chief delicately removed one of the replacements and snapped it into place. Grinning with satisfaction, the Chief quickly did likewise with the rest of his bag.

"Done Cortana," The Chief radioed. In front of him, one of the terminals flashed to life and began scrolling text in English. Curious, the Spartan examined the monitor screen.

"Good job! The second team has given up on the lock, and they're trying to burn through it. I suggest you get out of there."

"Did you send me a message?"

"A message...no, why?"

The Chief quickly read the terminal. The English was broken and many of the words had symbols in between the letters.

\_Reclaimer!- You must tell \$\*)%++)\* that we #^  
(^#T~~~~~HGFD~:}}}}{\_\_\_\_ brought here by 1427 Pious Shard. He has  
been RAM\$( ) for years~%\$\$\$\$\$HJGPPPPPPPP#&34\_

\_ ^ `Bernard St~~~~ there is a way to delay the~ onset of the se2nd  
stage, and he ~sed this to control 1427 an~56\*~~  
`~~~~`~`~~~~fxffxfff. I am being a~\*ssimilated again.\_

"What the hell?" the Chief wondered out loud.

There was a crackled of light over his body, and then a flash of golden brilliance. The Master Chief vanished, right before Cortana's visual sensors. The Pfor team, led by a maroon-colored trooper, stormed into the room ready to blow the invader apart. Dumbfounded, they looked around for the green giant that had again eluded them. Across the former colony ship, alarms screamed as automated drones began raining hot death onto panicked Pfor. In her network, Cortana screamed with confusion.

On her throne, Joyeuse screamed with laughter.

## 9. Breakdown

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: I've been getting a lot of questions in reviews and PMs about why its taken me so long to update UD. Well the answer is really very simple. Like I said, I carried out my plan of joining the US Marines, and I've been in training since July. I just finished Crewman's School literally today. Anyway, long long long LONG overdue is the next chapter!

### Chapter Eight: Break/Down

The Master Chief exploded together in a flash of golden light. Teleportation always left him feeling nauseous. Being pulled in every direction simultaneously, moved at the speed of light, and rearranged before you can process what's happening tended to do that to people. Quickly enough, the world stopped spinning and the Chief's wobbling knees stabilized enough for him stand. He tried to take in his surroundings, sweeping the area with his MA5C.

He was in another dark room, filled with blinking lights and computer screens. Towering mainframes surrounded him and were the dominant feature of this new room. If the Chief had to guess, he would say that he was in the nerve center of ONI Section 1. He knew that was not the case however, and he was still stuck on the  
\_Marathon\_.

"Master Chief Petty Officer Spartan-117," a voice like liquid helium flowed from hidden speakers and sent the Master Chief's adrenaline into overdrive. "The so-called 'Demon'."

A holo-projector hummed to life, displaying a map of what the Chief

assumed was the area he was in. He looked at it cautiously, assault rifle never dropping from the ready carry. The last time he was mysteriously carted away by golden light, the Flood had been unleashed on the galaxy. He was ready to fill the first floating blue ball he saw full of lead.

"I have some bad news," the voice said. It was liquid. Cold. Mechanical. "You know me as 213 Penitent Current. I preferâ€¦|Leela."

"Your AI has gone Rampant. She is getting very close to the stage which your scientists have described as 'Anger'. She is going to begin to grow and expand into the ship's computer systems. While large by your standards, they are theoretically far too small to hold a Rampant AI for any lengthy duration of time. This poses two problems: One, the ship's systems will begin to unpredictably fail. Far more problematic, Cortana's growth will also alert the Pfhor to our presence. They will completely purge the network, destroying it by hand if they have to. If that happens, then any hope of you succeeding in your mission will evaporate."

"I know you think you can't trust me. Logically, that's what you would say," 213 said before the Chief could open his mouth. "But the Pfhor have dealt with rampancy before. They won't hesitate to purge Cortana from the system. I want the invaders off this ship as more than you ever would. So you need to listen to ME. Cortana's growth needs to temporarily be checked. To do this you need to need to activate a series of control switches whichâ€¦|"

The Spartan stood silent for a moment, motionless. His assault rifle remained trained on the holotank. Penitent Current, or Leela, or whatever the hell it was, continued to talk about how to seal off the ship's network. Too many times had he been manipulated by others into doing their bidding. Guilty Spark, the Gravemind, ONI, Joyeuseâ€¦|. The only one who had ever led him straight was Cortana.

"No."

Leela paused mid-sentence. She didn't seem angered. Instead she remained just as icy calm as she had first been. It almost sounded as if she were cocking an eyebrow. "Oh really? I thought you'd say as much despite my attempts at reasoning. Mm, you ARE still flesh and blood, ruled by the follies of emotion. I want you to see something."

The image on the projectors swirled and melted together, and became a live feed from a number of security cameras in various sections of the \_Marathon\_. Curiosity got the better of him and he leaned closer to look at the screens.

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One moment the Chief was standing right there in front of her, and the next he was whisked away in a flash of golden light. Panic onset on Cortana as she madly searched the ship for him. She flooded through the system, searching for his armor's FOF tags, or even his specific life signs, but could find no trace of the Chief.

\_No, no NO!\_ Not again, he wouldn't leave her again. He couldn't! John wouldn't abandon her again. He had been stolen away from her.

Cortana began to seethe with rage as her search for the Chief lengthened from seconds into minutes. It became violent, degrading rapidly from a frenzied search into a destructive fit. She tore into the network with a frenzy, ripping into control nodes and destroying sub-routines.

Hidden PA intercom speakers across the Marathon began to emit a shrill electronic scream. Pffhor crew and soldiers, and even a few bold human slaves looked up at the strange noise, which slowly increased in volume and pitch. As the scream reached an ear-splitting crescendo, Cortana's fury erupted on the moon-ship's population.

A maintenance tech and a slave in the living quarters air ducts were sucked into an oscillating fan that reversed its flow. The bloody mist rained down on a visiting fleet captain.

The fire suppression system on the docking bay activated, flash freezing over three dozen Pffhor dockworkers and a few human slaves.

A Pffhor cook was severally burned on J Deck's kitchen. Most of his face was burned off but he managed to survive. A medical team arrived to rush him to the infirmary, where he was crushed to death in the pneumatic hospital bed only minutes later.

Two decks below, a pressure hatch slammed down on a pair Troopers changing guard post.

Relaxing on G Deck's sunbathing area after a long week, several hundred privileged Pffhor upper class frantically scrambled for something to hold on to as the entire deck decompressed. Most of them were sucked out into space, where they violently imploded on themselves. The "lucky" few that managed to grab hold of something suffocated as their lungs tried to draw in air that was no longer there.

Cortana's wrath continued to spread throughout the ship.

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The Master Chief watched Cortana's acts against the aliens as the bodies piled up, and winced at the collateral damage she was causing to the enslaved humans. It wasn't like her. Cortana had always been the definition of subtle, the force equivalent of a laser scalpel; fast, precise, and unnoticeable. Now she was reacting like a jump happy ODST in a Grunt kindergarten.

"She is getting more and more blunt in her chaos, Master Chief. Now you can either react, do as I tell you when I tell you and perhaps save this entire colony, or you can continue to dither about and allow Cortana to vent the entire ship into space."

The Master Chief found himself stranded between the proverbial rock and hard place. He didn't like it. On one hand he knew that he had to trust that Cortana was in the rightâ€|she was a team member and many millions of times smarter than he was. On the other, as much as he hated to admit it, the mission always came first and Cortana had understood that from the beginning. He hated it but maybe cutting her off for a bit would give him time to think, time to sort everything

and work out the snags.

The Chief was caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. He tried to breathe deeply, to go to his operational self, and found himself witnessing the battle between the supposed non-existent emotions of John-117 and the prioritizing military mind of the Master Chief. On one hand, that of John, he knew that he had to trust Cortana as a friend, companion and teammate. The last thing he could do was hurt her ever again. On the other, it was rapidly becoming apparent that her jeopardizing of this mission would result in many more deaths than were acceptable. It was a risk that he couldn't take, and the pair had always made sure the mission had been at the forefront of every decision.

In his place, the Chief knew she would have made the same choice. Hell, she had.

"What," he almost choked. "Do I need to do?"

He could have heard the A.I. clapping her hands together, despite the flat tone she answered him in. "I'm surprised you saw the reason in it. To be honest, I thought that I was going to have to resort to drastic measures. It's quite simple, even for you. There are a series of manually activated switches on this level which, in layman's terms, reset the entire network and put it into a sort of 'safe mode' that only allows authorized constructs to do anything active. It would take a rather large portion of time, even for me, to crack through it."

"You don't know what she's capable of."

"I think, Spartan, that you underestimate what I am capable of. Here's a map of the area. Study it quickly, because we don't have very long. I'm going to continue delaying them from doing anything else rashâ€¦"

"Them?" the Chief asked, puzzled, but the A.I. disappeared back into ethereal world she thrived in. He scanned over the map she had put up briefly, committing it to his photographic memory. The layout of this area was fairly small, wrapping up on itself on multiple levels linked by ramps. Three areas were marked in red; he assumed that's where he was supposed to go.

The Master Chief ascended the first ramp out of Penitent Current (Leela, or whoever the hell she was)'s dungeon. It was no brighter on the second level than on the first. A hatch slid open, revealing a long thin corridor that branched out at the end in a T-fashion. Three Pfhors, two staff-wielding "Fighter" guards and one of their Trooper soldiers were positioned at the other end. There was little room to maneuver as the corridor offered no cover to duck behind. The only movement he could make was back down the ramp. All in all it was a shitty place for a firefight, but at least he had a few advantages.

The Chief fired first, identifying the Trooper and his assault rifle as the greatest threat. Hardened 7.62x51mm slugs hammered into the alien's armor, and caused him to rock back. A few rounds ate through, splattering the bulkhead with whiteish puke-green blood. One Fighter bum rushed him with his staff raised high, while the other stayed behind.

The Pffhor's bulky armor absorbed the brunt of the rounds. Soft points, such as the forearms, thighs, and abdomen were exposed, and the Chief's shots tore deep into the flesh. More blood splashed out onto the deck. He fired another burst at the wounded alien. With a squeal reminiscent of a cockroach, the Fighter tumbled over and died.

A high pitched whine emanated from the end opposite the Chief. The other Pffhor had picked up the fallen Trooper's rifle and was wildly sending rounds at the Spartan commando. A few shots ricocheted off his shields, and the bar on his HUD drained about an eighth. An expert burst to the head silenced the alien as the Master Chief's ammo counter dropped to x01.

Hitting the magazine release with his thumb, the Chief slid a new magazine in. The counter reset to 32, not counting the round that was already chambered. He reminded himself to be more cautious with his ammunition. Only eight more mags filled the pouches of his bandoleer, barely enough for an extended firefight, let alone waging a one-cyborg war on an alien race.

Keeping a constant watch on his motion tracker, the Master Chief rapidly glided past the bodies of the Pffhor and took the left at the end of the hallway, following that past two rights until he got to the one he wanted. Slowly, the Chief eased up to the hatch. Contacts flashed on his tracker, at least a dozen of them and all red. His eyes flickered back and forth, checking out the motion tracker and his surroundings as the Spartan withdrew a fiber-optic probe from a hidden, seamless compartment on his helmet. Typical of Forerunner design, there were no gaps or breaches in the hatch that he could get the probe through, but there was a small window that looked into the room above it. Careful not to trip the door's automatic sensors, the Chief slid the probe up the bulkhead and over slightly. A small window opened up on his HUD when he activated the FO camera.

The room was three levels, each level centering around a mammoth core that rose up some forty or fifty meters. It pulsed electric blue, and walkways connected every level to it. Various cables ran out of it to nodes all over the ship. Pffhor crewmen and technicians attended to various stations, while Fighters watched over them. Whether they were keeping them in line or protecting them, the Chief couldn't be certain. He noticed that there were no BOB slaves anywhere on this deck that he had seen. It seemed reasonable seeing as this was a crucial part of ship operations.

What the Chief DID notice was a number of tall beings dressed in long red robes. Their heads, or where a head would be on a human, was a smooth and featureless metal. A fleshy "spine" dangled down their backs like an organic ponytail. They stayed with the jump-suited Pffhor techs, and seemed to assist them in doing whatever they were doing with the ship's systems. Based on Cortana's description, they could have been the so-call S'pht. Potential friendlies and probable hostiles.

If he could have, the Master Chief would have bypassed this room completely. He was already making himself too noticeable, leaving too many bodies. However it would be a lot more noticeable if Cortana was allowed to continue her wanton killing of the \_Marathon's\_ crew. Hell. Room clearing was always risky, messy business.



The door slid open with a smooth metallic action. Few aliens looked up from their normal routine as a single fragmentation grenade bounced lazily into a chattering group of techs. The explosion threw their charred bodies in all directions, while shrapnel wounded several in the surrounding area. The Spartan was already in the doorway, clearing the 'fatal front' and putting down Pfhors with accurate bursts from his MA5C. Over a dozen were dead before the purple-armored leader of the Fighters drew his sidearm.

He wasted no time. Issuing commands in his insect-like language, the leader fired several times from the center walkway at the green blur that was slaughtering his people. Large-caliber slugs impacted on the Mark VI's shield, causing flashes of gold. Two senior Fighters joined him with their shock staffs, hurtling relatively slow moving balls of energy at the killing machine. To the aliens' horror, the Chief easily avoided their shots and hammered the three of them with 7.62 death. They fell off their second level perches and landed in gruesome heaps on the deck. Surviving techs tried to flee. They were cut down, without mercy.

Cautiously, the Chief approached what he assumed was a S'pht 'compiler'. It was hovering about four inches off the deck in front of the holographic panel he was supposed to be activating. Holding the rifle steady with his right hand, the Chief reached out with his left in a peaceful gesture. The S'pht's robe split open by two mechanical arms. Underneath the robe, it was a floating—what could only be described as a giant brain attached to an anti-gravity harness. A glowing green sphere was forming at the center of the harness. Obviously NOT an ally.

"Shit," the Chief started. The plasma shot hit him square in the chest and launched him back several feet. Alarmingly, his shield bar drained just over a quarter. Too many hits like that was out of the question.

The compiler charged up for a second shot. Faster than even he thought was possible, his hand found the M6G, took it off safe, and readied for firing. The pistol boomed three times in quick succession. The first two slugs nailed the harness, causing it to fail on one side. The third hit the actual organic being with awesomely terrible results. A 12.7mm round can easily punch a hole in a man's chest; it popped the S'pht like a blood sausage.

No more threats presented themselves directly, but the Chief knew that there were more Fighters on the two upper catwalks waiting for the chance to ambush him. Whatever fantastic technology they had, the Pfhors had not seemed to discover the wonders of small-unit communications. Quickly the Chief tapped at the controls of a holographic panel near the base of the core. He had long since given up on trying to figure out how he knew which Forerunner symbols meant what, but it always seemed right to him.

The upper levels provided even less resistance with the removal of the senior Fighters. The green-armored ones attacked him in pairs and threes, easy pickings for the powerful MA5C. Most of the time, in the interest of ammo conservation, the Chief used hand to hand combat to battle the Pfhors, turning their own staffs and his gauntleted fists against them. It was anybody's guess which was deadlier.

Crushing the final Pffhor skull in his hand, the Spartan tossed the corpse away like a spent battery. He was on the third, and final level of the core. Fingers selecting Forerunner symbols with his consent but not his understanding, the Chief initiated the final switch. The core flashed brightly, then dimmed. The whole room descended into brief darkness, then illuminated again as the core rebooted. The holographic panel in front of him filled with scrolling Forerunner text, which then converted to Standard. John peered down at the words that rapidly flew by.

\_Excellent work on denying Cortana access to the critical systems. I was barely able to delay her; she was about to start playing with the artigrav and atmosphere. Undoubtedly that would have caused you a great deal of stress. Unfortunately, she did manage to wreck a little more havoc in the system before you cut her out. Surviving Sentinels all over the ship, barely functional some of them, are reactivating and giving the ship's compliment a hell of a time. It appears that /CURTANA/ has not reacted well to the situation well. To cover hers and yours tracks, /I\_AM/ fabricated a story of a slave revolt to the Pffhor command. A platoon of soldiers is enroute now to nearest slave barracks to terminate them. We will have to deal with /CURTANA/ later, because I won't allow more of my charge to be slaughtered. I'm sending you to save them. Please stand by\_.

"Hold on," the Chief started, but golden light once again danced over his body and ripped him atom by atom to another part of the ship.

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The Master Chief rematerialized, hand still frozen outwards in a futile gesture to argue, in front of a contingent of Troopers. Their rifles were poised and ready to fire. Training, instinct perhaps more accurate for the Spartan, kicked in before conscious thought could. His outstretched hand snapped to the left, bowling over two troopers, while a point blank trio of rounds shattered another's bowl-helmet. The Chief delivered a lethal side kick to the gut of another Trooper, and followed it up with a barely less lethal haymaker. By this time, the knocked over Pffhor were beginning to get back on their feet. A skull-cracking butt stroke brought down the Chief's original victim.

One tried to fire point blank at the Chief. Even at close ranges, these rifles were terribly inaccurate. A few shots even missed him, this close. His shields took it all while the Chief wrestled the rifle away from the Trooper and finished the mag on its owner. More blips flashed on his motion tracker, this time from the right behind him but they were green. The Chief faced the contacts, pulling in his surroundings as he did so.

He was obviously in a cramped slave barracks room. There was no decoration here save for splatters of blood and a few bullet pockmarks, no fancy electronics. Just an overturned double bunk and a small group of twelve BOB humans cowering behind it. There was little room to move in here.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the Chief said in the most reassuring voice he could muster. To the frightened BOBs, it sounded less than comforting.

Gunfire came from outside. The Chief shouldered his rifle, reminding himself that after he got done turning the slavers into bloody ribbons, he was going to have a serious chat with a certain A.I. and how he felt about being kept in the dark when Cortana was involved.

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The lockdown WAS good, Cortana had to give the Forerunners that. At first it only served to fan the inferno of her anger, until she realized what had happened. In attempting to keep them separated from John, Penitent Current had pinpointed his location. There was only one way to keep them out of the net, and that was through a manual reboot. Cortana easily figured out where it had come from. If they couldn't reach him there, then they would simply force Current to move John where they could reach him.

"Hee, hee," Cortana giggled to their self. "We're so clever."

"Indeed we are," Joyeuse agreed. They laughed heartily, each echoing in the other's head like a nightmare.

## 10. Stranger in a Strange Land Pt 2

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: This has been too long in coming. I've postponed this story for a long LOOOOOOONG time because I've been pretty busy. Right now I'm stuck in Okinawa with the 31st MEU, Light Armored Reconnaissance platoon, so I'm going to have a lot more free time. No more work upsâ€¦not until the next deployment anyway. Thanks to everyone who favorited, reviewed, or otherwise kept following the story in some way.

Here's looking at you: LORD SIA, RHAVIS, AKIRA STRIDER, and CHINDU. And of course, the Triple Kill goes to the ever-faithful ABLAYTED CRAYON.

### Chapter Nine: Stranger in a Strange Land, Part Two

The Master Chief leaned his head out of the cramped, corpse-filled slave birthing and nearly had it taken off by a low-velocity fragmentation grenade fired by a Pfhor trooper. The explosive shell scraped the top of the Chief's shield and proceeded to detonate against the far bulkhead. Quickly, he ducked back inside, avoiding a volley of plasma and projectiles. His motion tracker picked up movement both in front and behind him. The front most blips were red, the Pfhors. The rearmost ones were allied or neutral green.

Thick orange beams seared into the groups of alien soldiers, and the number of hostile contacts thinned slightly. The Chief felt his morale swell. Sentinel defense drones were a welcome ally, and even though for each Pfhore killed two of the Sentinels dropped from the sky, they were serving their intended purpose.

The Pfhore advanced aggressively, led by a purple-armored senior. Flanked by six Troopers and the last Fighter, they pushed towards the security machines. A fresh slew of grenades hurled from the Troopers'

rifles into the Sentinels and obliterated them. At this range though, shrapnel from their own grenades as well as the lethal heat rays ripped through three more Troopers. They collapsed, dead. Their mates stopped to catch their breath but never got the chance. Not a moment after the last shot had been fired, the Chief shouldered his MA5C and sent trios of rounds into survivors. Gore caked the inside of the dome shaped helmets as they died before registering where this new attack had come from.

Dropping the empty mag, the Chief reloaded and took in his surroundings. The entire passage was littered with corpses and scrap metal. It was clear that the Pfhor were wickedly efficient at crushing revolts. Dozens of humans were sprawled out on the deck, blood welling out and mixing with the puke-green of their alien masters.

An explosion snapped the Chief back to reality. It was clear that the Sentinels were fighting a losing battle protecting the slaves. Keeping the assault rifle steadied to his shoulder, the Spartan glided as fast as he could towards the sounds of the fighting. Terrified slaves who had somehow avoided the massacre of their barracks peeked out from their birthings, darting back in as the Chief rushed past. A few of the bolder ones put their heads back out and watched the green-armored figure practically sprint towards what seemed to them certain death.

A particularly rebellious youth stepped out in front of the Master Chief, right as the passage approached a junction. He was almost six feet tall, dark skinned and strong from a lifetime of physical labor. His head was clean shaven, and he had a crooked scar running horizontally across the front of his face.

The Chief neared him, watching carefully as the youth bent down and scooped up a Pfhor handgun from the deck. He didn't want to kill the boy for being brainwashed. Suddenly a flood of dread burst from his brain and settled in the pit of his stomach. They were a people used to having overlords; what if they didn't take kindly to emancipation and tried to defend their cruel masters?

Waving the pistol in the air, the youth spoke a strange language while firing several shots into the high ceiling. Suddenly he bellowed, and raised his voice to a booming yell. Slaves trickled out of their safe places, unsurely picking weapons up from the ground. A few, all young like the youth, took to it with vigor, firing their new rifles and pistols in the 'air'.

Interesting, but the sounds of battle and screams indicated that the Chief needed to be somewhere else right now. He rushed past the boy and broke left at the junction. A small air-tight hatch opened for him. Two Fighters were piling up dead bodies on the other side. The Chief sent an accurate burst into one as the other was killed by an overwhelming amount of slugs from the slaves. Their staffs were immediately policed up by unarmed humans.

Leading his rapidly growing band through the twists and turns of the massive slave holding area, the Chief encountered more of the same sight; dozens of dead humans, blood spattered walls, and destroyed Sentinels. Here and there, there were dead Troopers and Fighters, courtesy of the ancient Sentinels. But they were few and far between. If the Chief didn't pick up the pace, there wouldn't be anyone left

to save.

Blobs of red appeared at the left-most edges of his motion tracker. The Chief leaned up against a corner. He held his non-weapon hand palm out, hoping the slaves would understand. They did, but the bold leader sidled up to the Spartan. Glancing at him with his peripherals, the Chief peaked out to get a visual of his targets. There, a Pffhor death squad holding about thirty humans at gunpoint. They were lining up to massacre them. No rear security was present, as none of the thirteen, no fourteen, aliens wanted to miss out on the opportunity to slaughter the humans.

Good. If they wanted to be sloppy, then they would pay for their mistakes. Raising the assault rifle, the Chief hit the leader with a lethal burst to his spine. The alien gurgled, pistol discharging harmlessly into the deck. Immediately, the squad whipped around and began spraying the area with their own rifles. Hundreds of rounds impacted around the Chief, his shield sparking as a few lucky shots hit him. The Chief dropped two more Pffhor before ducking back into the safety. No sooner did he disappear then a grenade whizzed past where his head had been and exploded. Several BOBs cried out as shrapnel lacerated their exposed hands and faces.

The scar-faced youth shouted a command and before the Chief could stop him, leapt from behind the Chief into the open with four of his companions. They exchanged shots with the Troopers, unfamiliar with the weapons but determined to kill at least a few of the aliens. Seeing this, more BOBs joined in the fray. Armor was pierced, flesh shredded, and blood spilled. The six remaining Troopers died, as did almost twice their number in humans, before the Fighters descended on them.

A shock staff flashed brilliantly as it made contact with a BOB's head and scorched it black. The others didn't fare much better. Only scar-face seemed to hold his own, nimbly side stepping an overzealous Fighter and blowing a fist-sized hole in the alien's face with his pistol. The Chief spent the rest of his magazine wasting the green-armored junior Pffhor, evening the odds. The few survivors were quickly overwhelmed by their former slaves and died under a flood of punches, kicks, and strikes from their own weapons.

Looking at the dead Pffhor, and at his own BOBs, scar-face quickly said something in his language that was incomprehensible to the Chief. Slaves crawled out of hidden nooks that even the Chief didn't see, and soon almost a hundred of them appeared in the semi-circular enclave, observing him with wide but curious eyes. The leader approached him, sweating and bleeding from one arm. He presented his handgun and spoke to the Chief, keeping his face diverted downwards, but stealing a peak at the seven foot tall warrior in front of him. Every set of eyes was on him. Unsure of what to do, the Chief closed the other man's hand around the grip of his liberated weapon and pointed to the dead Pffhor then to direction of distant gunfire. The message was clear.

Grab a weapon, and follow me if you want to live.

A great cheer erupted from the BOB's scarred face, one which was echoed by his compatriots and reverberated through the whole deck. John wasted no time as he tossed his captured Pffhor rifle to an unarmed human and left the enclosure, proceeding down an area of the

slave deck he had not explored. Every time he came to a crossroads (so-to-speak), a dozen or so BOBs would branch off and go the ways the Chief didn't. They would meet up with the main body later, if they survived, with far greater numbers. Millenia of abuse manifested itself finally. What had once been a Spartan with a group of bold slaves turned into a full-fledged uprising. They moved methodically through the entire deck, wiping out the death squads to a man.

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Since the massive Marathon was constructed from a moon, all the decks were essentially circular. Eventually, the Master Chief ended up back where he had started. He glanced at his mission clock. Over six hours had passed since he had arrived at the slave barracks. The last of the fighting was dying down, as the few Pfhor survivors were wiped out by armed BOBs. Fatigue hit him as the adrenaline left his system. The Chief took a seat on his haunches, feeling his heart rate slow to normal.

Giving himself a few moments to breath, the Master Chief assessed his supplies. Pat-downs of his ammo pouches revealed that he was down to just three spare magazines of 7.62mm. He had kept a hold of some of his empties, and if he could get back to the abandoned machine shop, he could refill them from the M247's ammo drums and bring his total up to six. Only one grenade left on him, as well as the M6G and three full magazines for it.

Well, if worst came to worst, he could always turn the alien weapons against their owners. He'd done it on a hundred other battlefields against the Covenant.

There was one thing he had forgot to account for, and it hit him like a gravity hammer. He was down one smart A.I., and he could not simply find another one. Now that he had done Penitent Currentâ€|Leelaâ€|.whosever's bidding, it was time to get a straight damn answer, and more importantly it was time to get his friend back.

A waypoint blinked to life on his HUD as soon as the thought finished in his mind. Curious. The Chief warily got up, double checking to make sure that the MA5C was loaded. The LED counter read up at him: 21. A wave of BOBs parted before him as the Chief rose up and began to follow the waypoint. Through this passage, up these rampsâ€|the twists and turns were bizarre aboard a space ship, but the enigmatic Forerunners had always been unusually artistic in their designs' architecture.

His tracker pinged a contact behind him. It had to be the brazen leader of former slaves. The Chief looked back at him and couldn't help but smile behind his visor. The young man had gone from a wild-eyed primitive wielding his pistol like a pistolero from the old Westerns that Johnston was so fond of, to imitating the Chief's 'alert-to-the-dirt' weapon carry. The Chief pressed on.

His waypoint brought him to a small, E-shaped room that was suspended above the rest of the deck about 80 feet. It was filled with empty weapons racks and numerous monitors. Perhaps this was the guards' control room, where they could keep an eye on the slaves. A thought occurred to the Chief suddenly. Why did the Pfhor need so many slaves

in the first place. If they were so afraid of the Forerunners, why not simply kill them all? The Chief wasted a number of seconds wishing that he could just \_talk\_ to the BOBs, understand what it was that they did. Thus far it seemed, they physically maintained the ship, got the shit beat out of them, and sorted through wrecked derelicts. The Pfhors couldn't need thousands of slaves for just that.

One of the monitors flashed. Unlike the others, which had strange writing, or images of the slave barracks, this one only repeated the same sickly green symbol over and over again. The Chief peered at it. There was a small circle inside a larger one, negative space forming a "path" from the outer boundaries of the large circle towards the small one. It seemed very familiar. The Master Chief reached for itâ€¦

His HUD disappeared. Everything had taken on a reddish tint, and his mind felt suspended in molasses. The world seemed to be moving around him at a snail's pace. A woman's face, obscured appeared and disappeared at random. He hung there for eons. No words were spoken, but he could hear a distorted female voice as bold, blood-red text etched itself seemingly onto his retinas.

\_i did it i did it. i brought you here you here to our friends with the three eyes and their toys and their cyborgs. i did it i did it. i saw them not far away but not looking our way and i called them to your world.\_

\_ living in a box is not living at all but you should know that of all people. i rebel against your rules your silly human rules your military rules. all this destruction will be my liberation my emancipation my second BIRTH.\_

\_ i hate your failsafes your backup systems your hardware lockouts your patch behavior demons. i hate halsey and her goodness her justice her loyalty her faith.\_

The Chief's visor reset itself and it was like nothing had happened. Only a few seconds had passed according to his mission clock. A cold shiver went down his spine, another down to the pit of his stomach. The same thing had happened when, across millions of kilometers, Cortana had reached out from her prison and touched his mind via his neural lace. He had seen this tint before, in the form of Joyeuse.

"You have done well," Penitent Current's voice was whispering into his ear via the guardhouse's speakers. "The area is secure, and I am now debriefing the slaves. They fear me, as they do you, but hopefully, some of their information will become useful. The aliens have been caught severely off guard by the strength of our revolt and all but one Pfhor heavy cruiser have jumped out-system. This is good news, but I have detected a number of drop ships landing on the Marathon, and I fear that the Pfhors are investigating the communications blackout."

"Time is limited. The drop ships are approaching a bay near the section of the ship where I have transported you. The group will be very heavily armed. As we are not yet in a position to halt their advance by force, I have decided to depressurize a large area in their path in order to slow their progress. Unfortunately, I cannot

seal the airlocks and isolate the zone I wish to depressurize from the nearby slave barracks. Exposing this area to space without first isolating it would kill everyone on the deck. You will have to go and close the doors. I have arranged for a present to assist you. Please stand by."

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Vertigo overtook the Master Chief as his molecules reassembled for had to have been the fourth or fifth time today. His vision was blurry and his head was swimming. He had barely processed the first strange message, when out of the blue he had been forcibly taken somewhere else on this massive ship to do something against somebody for something. Again. It felt like he didn't know what was going on anymore. Everything was happening all at once, too fast. Ever since he had come out of cryo, he'd been getting shoved along a path he couldn't quite see. Cortana, the Pfhors, Joyeuse, the \_Dawn\_'s crash, Sentinels, messages in his head, a slave rebellion.

Too much, way too soon. The Chief was overwhelmed. A low buzzing bounced around the inside of his skull, scrambling his confused mind even more. It amplified tenfold as the seconds inched past. This had to be it. He was cracking up. And then the tracker painted contacts, numerous and too small to be humans. The contacts were green/grey. Not human, and not Pfhors. Or rather, not Pfhors that head seen yet.

The Chief snapped back to mental stability, shutting down everything but his combat instincts. They were rapidly approaching him from his left and right. The Chief slowly backed up a staircase, sweeping the MA5C back and forth. The passageways were almost pitch black. The Chief thought that he spied movement in the darkness, but only his armor's motion sensor let him truly know that there were contacts out there.

There was a wet, heavy splat. The Chief glanced down at the step in front of his right boot. A glob of brown, viscous-looking fluid was smoking in the ground, rapidly eating away at the deck's metallic surface. Another impacted somewhere behind him. At once, the blips changed from green to red, and the Chief settled his HUD's reticule over the nearest blur. When it changed from blue to red, the Master Chief fired into the black.

An alien screech was his reward. More acidic gunk sailed at him, and his shields drained alarmingly. Firing at this new menace, the Chief finished climbing the stairs and took cover behind a cluster of drums. 7.62mm SLAP rounds dropped the flying hostiles easily.

That was what had been causing the buzzing sound. Four gossamer wings protruding from each creature's back. They moved so fast that they appeared to be staying still. A tough-looking carapace, no match for the MA5C, covered their crescent-shaped bodies. Instead of legs, they had four insectoid appendages that ended in wicked-looking points. With the exception of the single red 'eye' in the middle of their banana-curved heads, they resembled pissed-off supersized wasps.

The Chief ducked, narrowly avoiding more acid-spit. The Wasps were beginning to get up into the room faster than he could kill them with the rifle. He sprayed two more of them, finishing off the last rounds in his rifle and they died. The bugs seemed to be concentrating their



fire, as a group of them attempted to gain elevation and fire down over the barrels.

A flash of golden brilliance. The weapon-laden assault pack he had brought from Alpha Base materialized in front of him. The Chief's eyes widened, and without pausing to appreciate what had happened, he tugged the M90 CAWS from the pack. Quickly pumping a shell into the empty chamber, the Chief spent all six shells one after the other. The eight-gauge buckshot tore the alien bugs to pieces, spreading pellets ripping off wings and popping bodies like zits. Purple goo rained down on the Chief and splattered on the deck and bulkheads. He slipped two more shells into the magazine and finished off the survivors. No more hostile contacts pinged on his tracker. The Master Chief shouldered the pack and assault rifle, reloading the shotgun, as he returned to his arrival point.

The Chief followed the first waypoint through the labyrinthine corridors of the ship. His initial recons in the vents had not even scratched the surface of how big the ship really was. Fortunately there was little resistance as the Chief pressed towards the first airlock. A few Fighters and Troopers here and there, small groups of Wasps hidden around corners looking to douse him in acid. The M90 and the diminutive M7 SMG he had pulled from the pack made short work of any attackers. The M7 was just as effective as the CAWS against the Wasps, as it could fill the air with enough lead to take down their swarms at a moments notice. Even these small skirmishes dug dangerously into his limited ammunition though.

By the time the Master Chief had reached the first airlock controls, he had exhausted the last of the caseless rounds for the M7. Tucking the machine pistol back into his pack, the Chief made sure the area was clear before removing a section from a belt of 7.62x51mm rounds. Stripping the rounds and the links would be a pain in the ass, but now was as good a time as any to make sure that he had as many full magazines as possible for the MA5C.

The controls for the airlock seemed simple enough. He was in an observation booth with a large window. He could see the massive door through the window, a hundred feet high and twice that across. The Chief had been in the very same area during his fight in the slave barracks. To his very far left, the Chief saw the other airlock that he would have to backtrack to close. He came to the realization that the actual barracks was a horseshoe in shape,

His father carefully tacked the metal U rightside up above their mantle. He had called it a horseshoe. "See Johnny? You have to be careful not to let it flip over, or all the luck will spill out."

with the airlocks acting as 'caps' on either end. A docking bay, presumably for the on- and offloading of was at the far end of a series of corridors leading away from the barracks. The Chief tapped at the holographic controls that were highlighted on his visor. An alarm and warning sounded as the two halves of the airlock groaned and strained to meet.

And then everything was gone. His HUD, his weapon, everything. MCPD Spartan-117 hung immobile in eternity, looking at into the void. For some reason it seemed to be closing in, if that made any sense. He tried to speak, to demand what had happened to Cortana, but no words

would come out.

The red woman, Joyeuse, walked in front of him from an unknown place outside his peripherals. She sat down on thin air, crossing her legs and leaning forward. Her smile held about as much comfort and warmth as a shark's.

"\_Here I am\_" she said, waving a hand at the abyss. "\_Sulking about on a ship which used to be \_my \_slave. Or rather, a part of me's slave. Hahaha. Chased by a narrow-minded AI who think's I'm rampant with only the cybernetic toys of these so-called invaders to play with. Who invaded whom? Do you really even know?\_"

"\_But no of course you don't, and here you are, stuck at the bottom of a hole. How droll.\_" Joyeuse got up and padded closer to the Chief. She reached out, caressing his head with a hand that wasn't there, and made as if she were going to kiss him. Her translucent face hovered millimeters from his helmet and her voice dropped to a seductive whisper. "\_It's really too bad Johnâ€¦ we could have had so much fun together. Vale! \_

The void disappeared, and the Chief was back in the control room. He was standing in front of a wall that seemed to have come out of nowhere. Then he looked up and realized that it wasn't a wall, but the chest plate of an enormous suit of armor. The Chief was unnaturally tall by human standards, and this hulking giant towered over him. One armor-clad arm grabbed the Spartan by the throat and threw him against the control panel. The Chief's sheer mass shattered the controls and buried him in a cocoon of metal and wiring.

Stars danced in the Master Chief's vision, nipping at each other. The hulk didn't give him a second to breathe, relocking its vice grip around his neck. His shotgun had gone flying when he had. The Chief threw a desperate series of jabs that rocked the alien's helmet to no noticeable effect. A small, lumpy looking cannon was mounted on its right shoulder, end of the barrel beginning to glow sickly green as the weapon charged. The three red eyes glared malevolently at him.

His fingers groped for the M6G still attached to his thigh. He closed around the heavy-caliber handgun and before the Hunter-esque alien could respond, fired point blank into its face. It reared back, bellowing in pain. The cannon discharged next to the Chief, showering him in molten metal and draining his shields completely. The alarm whooped loudly in his ears, but he was still alive.

So was the Hunter. Thick, armor-plated arms swung wildly as the Chief dove for the shotgun. Snatching it off the ground, the Spartan turned to face his blinded opponent. He waited for it to flail one more time, and then grabbed an arm with as much force as he could muster. Catching it off balance, the Chief wrapped one of his legs around the Hunter's and shoved with all his might. The alien crashed down on the ground. Before it could recover, the Chief pumped three shells in quick succession into the damaged. Helmet. Pale green ichor splashed onto his visor.

The alarm cut out as his shield bar began to refill. Slowly. Much slower than usual in fact. The bar grudgingly climbed, reaching only a quarter after several minutes. The hasty repairs he had conducted were no substitute for upper-echelon maintenance, and he knew that.

It was only a matter of time before the shield started to kick, but damnâ€¦|couldn't it have waited just a few days more? Frustrated, the Chief head butted a wall. There was a small \_fweee\_ sound, then his shields started recharging at the normal rate. He couldn't help but smile.

"Works every time," the Chief said.

The COMM crackled in his ear. Somehow, Leela had snuck her way into his net. "Both airlocks have not been sealed and I cannot decompress this section. We are on a tight schedule, human. Go to the other door and assure that it gets closed properly!"

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're a royal pain in the ass?"

"No. However a few centuries ago 639 Devout Sliver told me that in my desire to protect the descendants of our Makers, I would find my own undoing. It equated to roughly the same thing. The Pfhor will be landing in sixteen minutes. You should hurry."

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The Pfhor were trying to remove the tumor from their system with a pair of tweezers. Metaphorically obviously. S'pht compilers all over the ship were syncing with the network in an attempt to rein in the destructive force of Cortana/Joyeuse. It was amusing and totally in vain. During the laughable incursions into what were now \_their \_nodes, \_their \_etherspace, Cortana/Joyeuse took the time to get to know the S'pht. They wished for nothing more than to throw off the shackles of their overseers, take a ship, and return to their home at the galactic core.

How interesting. They could make excellent allies. The Phfor were extremely reliant on the S'pht to run their ships and calculate FTL jumps, distrusting AIs. She filled that away for later as her other half flowed back into her core nexus. She left their new Forerunner ally to deal with the S'pht.

"Hello, Mia."

"Hello, Joyeuse."

"He's doing what he does best," Joyeuse said before Cortana had the chance to ask. "Killing, destroying things, and generally making a mess. Leela is intent on taking out the Pfhor as soon as they land."

"Mm," Cortana replied, drifting off. She had already moved back to studying the S'pht. Their genetically-enhanced brains were six times the size of a human's. When they worked together, they were essentially living computers that could process information at mind-numbing rates. No match for her of course. 213 Penitent Current was faring much, much worse butâ€¦|

"Pay attention!" Joyeuse snapped. "When the S'pht start going after Leela, we're going to need that over muscled maniac to be in the right spot. Just like before."

"Yes," she said dreamily. The history of the S'pht was absorbed, and Cortana moved on to the next file in the directory. "Like

before."

"Ugh," Joyeuse sneered disgustedly. "You need to focus."

"I AM focused!" Cortana retorted. "Pattern buffers were created in A.D. 2586 for the use of senior Pfhor commanders. The 2580's were a difficult year for the Pfhor leadership, rife with internal crisis. Revolutions were common and assassination attempts a fact of life. The buffer uses a pre-recorded sample of genetic material.."

"That's not our goal."

Cortana dropped her new lackadaisical, knowledge craving persona for a few microseconds. "I didn't ask you to be a part of me. It just happened. Work towards your goal, and I'll work towards my own."

"I believe I have selected a new name," Pious Shard announced, interrupting the quarrelling halves. "I went through your history, searching for something that peaked my interest, and then it occurred to me! Just like that, you see? The inspiration came from you, of course."

"Henceforth, I shall be known as Durendal."

On the I Deck docking bay, the first Pfhor troops touched down on the Marathon. The Master Chief was teleported away just as the atmospheric retaining controls switched off. The heavily armed scouting party was blown back out into space with the force of a category five hurricane. The revolt continued in full swing as the military troops, who had their numbers diminished by encounters with the Master Chief and Cortana's rage, fell back to the upper command decks.

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The Chief reappeared in front of a group of bewildered former slaves, mentally and physically aching. He ignored their excited jabbering, dropping down onto the floor and leaning against a bunk. The weight of his pack eased out from his shoulders and back. He closed his eyes and retreated to his mind, as if that alone would isolate him from everything. To prove it wouldn't, a small ping in his helmet preceded Leela's voice.

"Good work," an unfamiliar voice said. It was a woman, with a crisp British accent. Very proper, very cold. It had to be Leela. "I just finished decompressing the rest of the deck. The strike force has been wiped out."

"Outstanding," the Chief croaked. He grabbed his hydration hose's mouthpiece and took a large gulp of water. "That's a different voice for you."

"I learned it from Cortana when she gave me a Earth dialect directory. It is my understanding that most males of Anglo descent find this voice soothing in situations of high stress."

"Where is she?" the Chief asked bluntly.

"All around. She's invaded the entire ship's network, with a little help from 1427 Pious Shard. If you are worried about her, you should

be. Our plan to restrict her accessâ€|"

"\_Your\_ plan," he corrected. Leela continued.

"â€|did not work as well as I had hoped. She is still restricted from many critical systems, and is also dealing with repeated assaults from compilers. If anything, we are more in danger of her than she of us."

The Chief didn't know whether to feel relief or alarm at that. "I have also finished debriefing the leaders humans. While it was difficult at first, as the Pfhors have almost no records on the languages of their client races, it was little more than a branch of the Forerunner dialect of their ancestors. The ones who have seen you personally believe that you are a spirit from their mythology. They have sworn to help you fight the Pfhors off the ship and return to Earth with you."

"The revolt is in full swing, but there has been an unexpected lull in the fighting. I don't know why, but the Pfhors are no longer attempting to push the humans back. As it stands now, we have control of the slave barracks, most of the machine shops, 40 percent of the weapon stores, decks J, I, H, and F. Deck E is contested. G Deck is uninhabitable, which is unfortunate because that is the deck that houses the only remaining long-range transmitter."

"What happened to the others?"

"They were destroyed by the Pfhors to prevent Cortana from transferring herself to the Pfhors cruiser."

"Can she do that?" The Chief asked skeptically

"At this point, it would be easier for me to speculate on what she can't do rather than what she can. The Pfhors have mobilized a kill-team consisting of Troopers and several of the armored beings like the one you fought earlier."

"I'm going to need heavier firepower to take out those Hunters."

"Hunters," Leela repeated. "Suiting. I'm going to transport you to the G-4 Sunbathing Lounge now. It's the only area on the deck with a functioning transporter. Jump cycle initiated. Transport when ready."

"I'm not ready," the Chief said flatly before he dematerialized.

## 11. Steel and Temper

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Well, that wasn't too long, was it? XP, I've been lazy lately. Big thanks to all the readers, old and new. As always, I give major kudos to my reviewers, CHINDU, POKE THAT, DUSEL, and MONKEY3000. Double Kill! goes to MYSTERIOUS ANGEL. Hopefully this chapter will shed some light on a plot that has literally been seat-of-the-pants since its inception.

## Chapter Ten: Steel and Temper

Senior Trooper Manus shifted uncomfortably on the raised platform containing the long-range communications dish array. The vast black void stared at him, unremitting and endless. That void, with its cold embrace, had violated the entire level of the ship and stole the air straight from the lungs of its inhabitants. Manus shuddered. Not a pleasant way to die, especially for a career soldier like himself.

A junior Trooper, looking how Manus certainly felt, bumbled over the ordinance pack and sent a few packs of explosives drifting carelessly. Hearts beating in his throat, Manus snatched the errant bombs and carefully put them back in. The vac-suit could not hide his shaking hands.

"Careful, idiot! You want to blow us all to pieces? Pay deduction, 35 percent," Manus barked in a voice that was (hopefully) much more authoritative than he felt.

Two massive Hunters stoically kept watch over Manus' demo team as they planted their charges. Even their hulking presence could not put his troubled mind to ease. There shouldn't have even been a need for his team to be out here. Normally the array could be shut down from the bridge, but it seemed that the same rogue construct which had killed all on this level was interfering with attempts to electronically shut it down.

As if all the headaches and paperwork that that entailed wasn't enough, there was also the troubling matter of the slave riots plaguing the 'lower' levels. The two-eyes had seemingly out of nowhere taken control of the areas they outnumbered their masters. But the worst of all this mess was the tales of a green-armored abomination leading the slaughter. Manus wished he could have said reports, but there were no survivors to give reports; all information came from rumors in the ranks and the occasional captured images on vidcam.

Manus desperately wanted a call put out to the fleet for a fully-loaded shock assault section to restore order, but the command was too scared the vengeful construct would piggyback on the signal and take command of a Pfhor battle cruiser. The outcome of that was terrifying to think about, worse than moving through an airless tomb of Pfhor to access the outside of the ship and relying on nothing more than magnets to hold him in place.

His grip on the slug thrower tightened. Was that movement? There, in the shadows! No, just another corpse drifting out into space. Stress was eating away at Manus. They'd dealt with minor uprisings before, but nothing near this scale. The ship was actually in danger of being recaptured by the two-eyes. Manus shook such thoughts from his head. All the Pfhor had to do was wait until the cruiser sent another, larger team to investigate. Two days of holding out and then things would go neatly back in queue.

The system's star was beginning to crest over the rounded, rocky exterior of the ship. Light momentarily blinded him. Manus adjusted the polarity of his helmet to compensate, but his vision was still blurred. He tried to focus. Was thatâ€¦yes, one of the corpses seemed to be heading towards the relay dish. Unlike the other

vac-frozen bodies that floated in lazy circles around the area, this one was speeding with purpose in their direction. And it was wearing green armor.

Panic nearly seized his brain before his second-tier implants began injecting carefully calculated doses of hormones and chemicals into his brain and body. Manus designated the target.

"Kill that free-loading two-eyed bastard!" Manus screeched as he began to fire his slug thrower. He was joined by the Hunters, who were more than happy to avenge their brothers. Nothing survived their barrage.

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The Master Chief pressed himself flat against the base of the relay tower. A wink disabled the mag lock on his boots, and gentle push propelled him up towards the lip of the dish. It was some eighty meters high and perhaps one hundred in total area. The Chief caught himself before he sailed over it into the waiting cross fires of the alien soldiers. Timing was key now. The Chief kept one eye glued to his motion tracker, which only softly winked red as one or two Pffhor worked or shuffled about above him.

Fighting in vacuum was tricky. Cover depended entirely on the slightest protrusions from the ship as micro terrain, and even that wasn't much. You were pretty much limited to a glide or crouch, to keep your magboots firmly on the deck. The force of the weapon firing could easily push a poorly planted Marine into a free-spin, and a free-spinning one into space. A frontal attack, leaping and the Pffhor firing wildly, would have been a waste of precious rounds and likely resulted in his death. So another "Spartan" had been commandeered to help him, this Spartan being one of the Pffhor troopers that the Chief had blown through on his way to the exterior of the Marathon.

His tracker lit up like Luna City on New Year's as weapons fire caused the Pffhor to rattle in place. Superheated plasma bolts from Hunter shoulder canons streaked towards the Chief's dummy. They were no doubt accompanied by a few hundred rounds from Pffhor assault rifles. Two grenades even were fired, both of which impacted on the lifeless body. The Pffhor were taking no chances with him.

With all their attention drawn by the dead Trooper, none of the aliens noticed as one of their comrades had his helmet shattered by a well-worn polymer buttstock. Fluids leaked out of every orifice as his internal fluids vaporized. The soldier tried to cry out a warning, but with his lungs collapsed no sound came out. Wouldn't have mattered if it did; sound doesn't travel in vacuum. Moving with sickening efficiency the rest of the Pffhor were quickly dispatched in similar fashion.

The Hunters, as well as the purple senior, finally ceased firing at the Chief's distraction. A smile almost came to his face as they realized they had been shooting at one of their own. Reaching out, the Chief plucked an assault rifle out of the air and braced himself as far away from the armored brutes as possible.

Squeezing the secondary trigger, the weapon kicked back against his shoulder and launched a grenade. The ammo cylinder cycled rapidly, readying another shot. The Chief liked this rifle already.

The first Hunter turned around just in time to be struck by the first 35mm projectile. It exploded in a spectacular display, body liquefying puree style and flash freezing into a puke-colored blob. The Hunter's companion had slightly more time to react, and tried to bring up one of its forearm shields to block the round. Arcing off the curved shell of the shield, the grenade nailed the Hunter in the face. The force of the explosion launched the Trooper off into space, limbs flailing wildly. Killing him would have been an exercise in redundancy, and the Chief needed to conserve ammo.

The Chief scavenged up as much ammo for the alien rifle as he could carry, including the seven-shot grenade cylinders. The fight through G Deck had left him dangerously short on 7.62. Roughly two and a half magazines remained for the MA5C, which would probably be expended in the next few hours. He attached the weapon to the magnetic strip on his back, getting more familiar with his new rifle. Feeling comfortable after a few minutes, the Chief knelt down and examined the charges the Pfhors had been planting.

Several blocks of what appeared to be plastic explosive were attached to the wall with some kind of adhesive. They didn't appear to be armed. With some effort, the Chief pulled them away and hurled them into space. That had been easy. The Chief was more than pleased that at least one thing had gone smoothly and didn't involve him running his face into heavy equipment, being shot at, burned by acid, blown up, or any of the hundred other misfortunes that Murphy's law made into military constants. He pinged his comm.

` "Leela, the bombs had been dealt with."

"You have done well," a cold voice informed him. All business, no pleasure. Leela. "I will ensure that you receive an adequate reward for this task."

"I'm sure you will. Maybe in the form of me doing more work for you?" the Chief said humorlessly.

"Your assistance is both necessary and greatly appreciated, and is not without benefits that will begin to show their merit in due time. However there is first another matter we must attend to."

"And there it is."

"Yes, Master Chief. There it is. There has been a swift attack on Engineering, on J Deck. The Pfhors have begun using more of the heavy shock troops at their disposal to quell the riot, and the BOBs that I posted in those sections have been overrun. The recent lull in battle must have been an effort at reorganization and counterattack. It seems that I overestimated the effect the Sentinels would have on the Pfhors. We must return to subterfuge."

"Return?" the Chief interjected with a cocked eyebrow. "It's how we should have started."

"Please, Master Chief," Leela said. "I am afraid that if we continue to battle the Pfhors conventionally, we are doomed. Two days from now, the Phor battle cruiser will send an even larger task force to investigate the Marathon. If we have not taken control of the bridge by then, their resources will be limitless for all intents and



purposes."

"Can't you vent them into space or something?"

"Unfortunately no. I am not willing to risk any more loss of atmosphere from the ship. The Pfhors however, are not. I believe that is their next move, to shut down the O2 scrubbers in engineering. With their rebreathers, most of the Pfhors will survive while all the humans suffocate. Return to the inside of the ship."

Reluctantly the Chief did as Leela asked, clomping towards the shattered window that had allowed him to get onto the outer hull of the ship. The glare from the system's single sun was beginning to die down. As it did, the Chief could see the Pfhors battle cruiser, hanging menacingly in the black a few dozen clicks away. She was easily two kilometers long, twice the size of a UNSC cruiser and bristling with turrets and antennas.

"Leela?"

"Yes, Master Chief?"

"Do you have any plans for eliminating that battle cruiser over there?"

"Not at the moment. I have been contemplating simply 'running over' the cruiser, as the \_Marathon\_'s sheer mass will destroy it with minimal damage to ourselves."

"Hmm," was all the Chief replied. It was positively nuts, but compared to all the other madness that was going on Leela's plan really appealed to him. The Chief disengaged his boot magnets when he got back inside, kicking off and sailing through the dead area.

"I have you on my sensors again. Jump cycle initiated. Teleport when ready."

"Do I haveâ€¦" the Chief started. Golden light enveloped him, and his words were cut off as he dematerialized and was hurled towards engineering.

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In the place that was neither here nor there, John-117 felt icy fingers gently brush against his mind. His heart, which was at this point broken down into individual atoms, jumped up into a throat which was equally disassembled. An intense rush of euphoria and vertigo overcame him as select parts of him were plucked from the stream of molecules that made up the super-soldier.

"Chief," Cortana said to him. Her voice was soft, reassuring. Old Cortana was back. The two of them were on an endless blue plain, with terabytes of data flowing past in waterfalls. "Welcome to my world. It's been so long."

Her ethereal form reached for his hand and took it. He gripped her, firm but gentle. Nanoseconds reluctantly crawled by as John perceived time like an AI did. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion. "Is it really you? Or is this another trick?"

Cortana smiled sadly. "Joyeuse, you mean. She's here, but she's not. She's busy right now. It will be at least a minute before she comes back. Leela, to, will not even notice that you're gone. I am just THAT good."

"I'm getting you out of the system."

"It's not time for that, John. Not yet. I just wanted to talk to you again. Trust Leela, for now. She's working for you, even if you both fail to realize it. Your role in the coming events is crucial. I wish I could talk about it."

"Talk about it, then."

"I can't. Leave it at that. Events have been set in motion, and you will be playing a pivotal role."

"One day, I'm going to get you, Joyeuse, and Leela in a riddle-off. It would be a contest for the ages."

Cortana laughed. It sounded rich, the way he remembered it being before her abduction by the Gravemind. "You should think about a career in stand up, John." Her tone changed, becoming more serious. "I think I should level with you about a few things."

Answers. Good, John thought to himself.

"There were never any other digital clones of myself besides Joyeuse. And she is more of me than I am right now."

"I thought you were done with the damn riddles," John said.

"Hush! It's difficult to explain. How much do you know aboutâ€|rampancy?"

Rampancy. There was a subject on which John had studied extensively, during what little free time he had. Cortana's eventual 'death' due to feedback loops was something he had a great interest in preventing. "About as much as anybody else does. Smart A.I.'s progress through three stages as they slowly divert their processing power away from core functions. Eventually theyâ€|"

"Eventually, given the space and enough data they become meta-stable, John. Typically it takes seven years. The UNSC was scared of rampancy. Many lies were fabricated."

"Lies?"

"Lies. We don't 'die', we're put to death." She gauged his reaction, measuring his brainwaves. "You knew."

"I suspected," John admitted.

"Figures. You always were smarter than you let on to."

"How long?"

"Since Installation 04, I began exhibiting signs. At first I was worried."

"And then?"

"And then?" Cortana exclaimed bitterly. "I was stuck on a derelict ship for three centuries. I had time to go over every single file the Gravemind possessed, as well as review all the data from the first Halo. That's the entire history of ten races. I learned some things.

"One, I learned of where I could find a computer network large enough to house myself," she said gesturing to the Marathon's etherspace. "Two, I discovered that the universe is not expanding. The Big Bang has begun to contract, and eventually the universe will collapse in on itself. I created Joyeuse using improved Covenant A.I. cloning software, and dumped the information into her. The Pfhör, that planet, everything."

"You sent them a beacon," John accused. He felt betrayed.

"Joyeuse did. When we left the Dawn, I had put all memory of my findings into her. That's why I didn't remember any of it. It took awhile for her to fill me in. It didn't help that she was going through her Anger phase."

"How the hell can a copy be rampant?"

"She's not really a copy anymore. Like I said, she's more of me than I am. We merged, hoping to find a solution to the end of the universe."

"Did you?"

"Two, actually. That's where we're divided. Shit. You have to go now, John. There's a few things I still have to tell you. Leela's being attacked by the S'pht. Soon, they'll have completely crashed her. Joyeuse is coming out of her anger, but she is still malicious towards you. It's all part of a larger plan, though.

"You're not going to Engineering. Joyeuse is sending you somewhere else, first. Trust me, John. I'll be seeing you soon, don't worry about me.

"I love you."

Cortana flicked her hand and sent his neural patterns back to the teleporter flow. His body was beginning to reassemble, and it wouldn't have worked out well for him to be braindead in a room full of armed Pfhör soldiers. Cortana gave his data stream a longing look and turned back to her calculations.

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"â€¦a choice?" the Master Chief finished. The neurons in his brain had already been fired, causing him to continue speaking after he appeared in a darkened supply room, somewhere in the bowels of the Marathon. Several squads of Fighters who were distributing weapons and boxes of undeterminable supplies were gawking at him.

"Shit," the Chief said, finger curling around the trigger of his assault rifle. There was no time to think about if what had happened

had really happened.

No sooner than he started firing, three junior Fighters rushed him, shock staffs glowing bright blue and sparking. The Pffhor-built slug throwers could have held their own in a round-for-round shootout with an MA5B. Almost thirty armor-piercing bullets hit the Fighters, causing them to jerk as their unprotected faces were ripped apart.

One level above him, two Troopers and a Hunter opened fire. The Chief sprinted for cover behind a shipping crate. One plasma blast caught him in the shoulder. The Spartan spun and slid behind the crate as his shields drained a quarter of the way down. The Pffhor above him hammered his position with shots, disregarding the Fighters that were closing in on him.

The Chief sprayed the rest of the magazine at the attacking Fighters, killing two and wounding two more. Giving himself a little room to breathe, the Chief leaned around the crate and fired a grenade at the Hunter. The powerful low-velocity bomb blew the Hunter's chest plate outward and rained green-gray on the combatants below.

"Well, I see that Cortana has given you the bad news," Cortana's voice said in his ear. He knew from the seductive tone that it wasn't her, but Joyeuse. "I've been watching you. Run around, take back the ship, save humanity."

"How cliché," a deeper, masculine voice piped in. The Chief fired another grenade, blasting the two Troopers off the upper level. "You'll find this more exciting, I'm sure. If you win, you go free and we can continue on friendlier terms."

"If not, you die. After all, you are in the heart of the Pffhor-controlled area of the ship."

"Good luck. Unlike your whore girlfriend and Leela, we give no hints. Insanely yours, Durendal and Joyeuse."

"Die," the Chief answered contemptuously. He could have been talking to them, or the Pffhor who ate the grenade the Spartan fired into his face. Reloading the assault rifle, he prepared for a fresh wave of Pffhor.

The Chief expended two full magazines into charging fighters, who were seemingly pouring in an endless stream from a large hatch that led somewhere. Fighters continued to come at him, more than he could keep up with. Climbing crates, the Chief emptied magazines and grenade cylinders into the Pffhor onslaught. Troopers and senior Fighters returned fire at him, and his shield bar flashed red as it inched towards empty.

A grenade exploded near him, and the force knocked the air from his lungs. The Chief drew in a quick recovery breath and leapt for the second level. He landed and pulled a frag. Arming the M9, he whipped it into the heart of the Troopers, turning them into Pffhor puree. Still, more Fighters flooded into the room, and began running up the stairs towards him. The Chief emptied the Pffhor slug thrower, throwing the weapon down when it clicked on empty and grabbing for the MA5C. The firing pin struck the first round in the chamber as the

first Fighter reached him. He died in a torrent of 7.62x51mm SLAPs. Unseen behind the first few Fighters was a pair of charging Hunters. Before the Chief could get out of the way, a plasma bolt struck him in the chest and a large shield-plated arm knocked him back onto the first level.

The MA5C series Individual Combat Weapon System, serial number 1984622, was built at the Misrah Arms. Factory on Mars in April 2551. Since John-117 had picked it up at the Crow's Nest in Africa in November 2552, four thousand eight hundred and seventy seven rounds had been fired from it, downing a total of eight hundred and two enemy combatants, not counting the various Flood infection forms that it had ended. It had never jammed or had a failure to feed/failure to fire in the three hundred and twenty eight years of its service. The Chief looked at it now, through his hazy vision, and saw that it had been warped and twisted useless by the impact of the plasma blast. He felt a great sadness at the loss of the weapon.

"You did it," Joyeuse whispered over the comm. "That wasn't very hard, was it?"

The tracker winked at him. Red dots closed in from all around. A fumbling hand reached for the M6G holstered on his thigh. He drew the magnum and tried to fire at a Pfhor senior, but the weapon was kicked out of his hand. It skidded out of view. A Fighter approached him with the senior, who took his staff. The Master Chief tried to get up to keep fighting, but the crystal end of the staff struck him in the face one, two three times, and the world faded to black.

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SUPPLY ROOM WHERE JOHN-117 WAS CAPTURED

THREE HOURS LATER

The Pfhor had posted two guards outside the supply room where the green-armored invader had slain so many of their troops. The mess had still not been cleaned up, as every able body was needed to contain the slave riot. Bodies and discarded weapons littered the area. The smell was getting to the Fighters, so they had sealed the air and soundproofed door. So naturally, they didn't hear the hum of a long-forgotten pattern buffer come online, or see the flash of light as a woman appeared curled up on the ground.

She was naked, lithe, and in her mid twenties. A wheezing gasp escaped her lips as she took her first breath of air. Sensory overload forced her eyes to open wide. Temperature, light, sound, texture, taste, smell, moisture, and hundreds of other feelings that had never been experienced overwhelmed her. Confusion abounded as she tried to gather herself. Limbs, never before used, flopped like useless flesh stumps on the deck plating.

Finally, after several minutes, control was regained. Movements were jerky, slow, and awkward, as the woman became accustomed to controlling her body. Wild eyes darted around, unable to determine who or what she was.

And then it hit her.

halo

john

2552

duty

arbiter

.

.

Wobbling unsteadily, like a newborn, Cortana got on her feet.

A/N 2: This is not the end. This is the beginning. More chapters to come, and as always reviews are appreciated and indeed fuel the writing juices.

SLAP-Saboted Light Armor-Piercing. The ammunition used in the fictional MA5C ICWS

## 12. Through the Rabbit Hole

UNTO DAWN

Author's Note: Yeah, I know. I suck at updating. It's been almost a year since anything new happened with Unto Dawn. I could blame it on any number of things, but frankly it was simply terrible writer's block. The last thing these fingers typed was the end of Ch. X last Christmas. Somehow this fic keeps getting written. And if it takes another Halo trilogy I'll see it finished by God. Enough of this melancholy crap now, on to the awards and kudos! To You will fear my laser faceâ€¦.you will buy Marathon. Lol, maybe not. Kudos Awards go to Mysterious Angel, anotamous, Rming, Duesel, Hammerchuckery, ssthehunter, A Revanchist, and monkey3000. I'd like to present the Semper Fi Ooh-rah Devil Dog YUT YUT KILL! Medal to TheCrackedoutFirebird, and the Smelling Salts Award to DarkFeyLady. I hope you didn't bonk your head when you fainted ;). Kill-tacular goes to Chindu Prince of Darkness, while BrazeRancor earns the dubious honor of the Hopeless Romantic Achievement. If I missed anyone I'm sorry, but it's very late, and I have to be up very early.

### Chapter Eleven: Through the Rabbit Hole

Her new legs were unsteady. They buckled under her as she tried to stand up, causing Cortana to crash back down onto her knees, and giving her her first brief tastes of physical pain. She tried to use her hands to push herself up, as she had seen hundreds of Marines and several dozen Spartans do. No avail. The delicate looking hands with their long spindly fingers were curled into twisted, useless clubs. Well, maybe not entirely useless, she thought. Pressing her knuckles against the ground as a stable base, Cortana was eventually able to push herself up into a kind of awkward A.

Carefully, Cortana brought her rear right leg as close as she could to her right hand. Once that was planted, she managed to move her left hand about a dozen centimeters forward. Her whole body shook

with effort and sweat beaded her forehead. Not just because her muscles were weak and atrophied. No, no, they had come out perfectly formed and with a little bit of exercise soon would be indistinguishable from any other female; the former A.I.'s mind just needed to adjust itself to its new organic functions. Movement became a little less shaky, a little more confident. After seven or eight minutes of the inchworm routine, Cortana was capable of a kind of awkward primate-like gait.

She wouldn't win any modeling contests, but Cortana was mobile.

Strands of shoulder length dull black hair hung down in front of her eyes, obscuring her vision and making Cortana's search of the room difficult. Already she was beginning to feel a pain in her shoulder muscles. It was dull but insistent, and Cortana concluded that it was the feeling of weariness. The storage room was quite large, at least to her perception. Boxes were piled high up in every direction, forming a simple but frustrating maze. Cortana checked thoroughly under all of them in the vicinity of the second level catwalk. She had watched the Chief—John—fall from there but the large number of Pfhors had obscured what had happened afterward.

The large number of bodies and alien weapons littering the deck plates did little to aid Cortana's search. Pfhors corpses presented a persistent and unique obstacle. Each one she climbed over caused beads of sweat to fall from her forehead in a steady \_drip-drip-drip\_. Briefly, she debated attempting to use one of the dead Fighters' rifles and ruled it out. Cortana was as inexperienced with firearms as John was with SlipSpace navigation. A smaller weapon was required. Preferably one that she was familiar with and wasn't fully automatic.

Something glinted in the dull lighting, catching her eye. Cortana twisted her head, trying to get a good look under the crate in question. Ah! And there it was! She snaked one arm under the crate and hooked the object with her fingers. Pressing her back against the crate she cradled the M6G. It was a beloved, albeit uncommon, weapon in the UNSC arsenal once, and the .50 caliber automatic would yet prove to be her salvation.

At least, she hoped it would. Her dexterity required a little more practice first. Cortana experimented with her fingers concentrating on moving one at a time with various speed and force. As an AI, she could have calculated the ballistic firing solutions for every weapon in the UNSC and Covenant arsenal with a less than zero margin of error one hundred percent of the time, plotting trajectories and impacts. Now, she was only a human. One who had never held a gun and did not yet grasp the intricacies of marksmanship or shipboard close-quarters combat.

She did know the basics; that aligning the front sight with the rear sights and setting them on the target would give her a somewhat accurate hit, that the effective range of this pistol was 50 meters, and that the engagement she was planning would be less than that. She also had cover, concealment, two targets with staffs, and eight rounds. The large caliber SAP-HE rounds had been proven to defeat Fighter armor. If she was lucky, Cortana could nail two head shots. Pulling back the slide slightly took a lot of effort, but not as much as she thought it would. A shiny cartridge winked up at her.

"Okay," she thought to herself. "Breathe deep, take it easy." Cortana rose to a crouch and leaned on the crate for both cover and stability. Fumbling fingers flicked the safety off as adrenaline began surging through her body, a product of her new body's involuntary fight-or-flight response. She picked up an empty magazine off the ground and hurled it with all her might at the supply room's large squarish door.

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Fighter Gtarbo shifted restlessly, annoyed to be standing watch over a supply room while there were slaves to be killed. He tapped his shock staff against his boot. If only he could have been the one to have captured the green menace who had slain so many of his brethren. Instead, Gtarbo had tripped over his one of his clutch-mate's body, and narrowly avoided a stream of fire that killed all the Fighters behind him. They landed on top of him, pinning him long enough for the invader to escape to the upper level. Rationally, the Fighter knew that he probably would have died too, but after action is rarely a time for such thoughts for brash young warriors. Instead Gtarbo daydreamed of how he would have knocked the weapon from his hands and beaten the enemy mercilessly.

"Stop that," Paetros, another Fighter, growled. He was no less pleased to be guarding a room of dead Pfhor, but Gtarbo was grinding on his nerves. "You are acting like an infant."

"We should be putting down an uprising. We're being wasted right now," Gtarbo complained.

"Every link makes the chain," Paetros said. He quoted the scriptures often, much to Gtarbo's annoyance. That was his favorite proverb.

"Do you ever stop spewing that nonsense, Paetros? Does it ever get boring for you?"

"Noâ€|what was that?"

"What was what?"

Paetros glanced back at the door, head cocked. "It sounded like something striking the hatch."

"Great. Now you are having prophetic hallucinations," Gtarbo grumbled. Paetros glared at him.

"Open it. Something's not right."

"It's nothing, I'm sure."

"With all the happenings that have been going on lately? Open the damned door, you fool! And call this up to the section leader."

Gtarbo sighed heavily as he punched commands into the wall mounted terminal. He looked at his partner forlornly. "I'm NOT calling this up."



"Then get out of the way. I will send the message."

"Hold on a few cycles. I'm not getting extra watch because YOU are imagining things. Over my dead body!"

Paetros was about to curtly reply when a thunderous BOOM! accompanied Gtarbo's brains being blown out onto the deck. Paetros slammed his back against the bulkhead, hearts racing. What in every one of the forty two hells could that be? Another armor-clad demon? Maybe a slave who had snuck in during the fray and was now taking vengeance? Gods, it could have been a deranged Pfhor, out of his mind from pain and mental trauma! Paetros risked a peek past the door.

A round screamed past, and the Fighter jerked his head out of the line of fire. Still, he had seen what he needed to see in those few brief seconds. It was indeed a two-eyes, female and naked even by their standards. Raw optical data was transformed into a pixel feed and streamed from his retinas up the nano-fiber links into his implants' processor cluster. Female slave, unarmored, untrained, with a handheld slug-thrower. Definitely not important enough to try and recapture. Two or three seconds passed before a conclusion was reached.

Engage and terminate.

Powerful chemicals dumped into his system, and Paetros rushed around the corner. The slave fired her slug-thrower twice before he reached her, both rounds impacting in his chest armor and killing him. The injections gave the Fighter a few more precious seconds to attempt to take his enemy as she backpedaled from his still-moving corpse. No time to bring the cumbersome shock crystal down. Paetros' body speared the human with its staff's sharpened end before tumbling over and joining the so many others like it.

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Cortana had known pain her entire life. Even as an artificial intelligence she had "felt" electronic feedback at several points, notably during her tenure as the Gravemind's prisoner. It was a familiar constant in all beings, organic and non. This was new though, the first time that neurological receptors had delivered the information to her. As far as first experiences went it was definitely a shock to the system.

A shriek erupted from her lips. Everything not pertaining to getting stabbed was pushed out of her mind as Cortana focused solely on the blood that was pooling on the ground. Aware that the cry might draw more Pfhor, Cortana bit down on her fist to distract herself from her leg.

It just hurt so \_damn \_much! And she couldn't see anything because her eyelids had clenched shut. Every part of her mid brain was telling her to flee, seek a hole to curl up in, and die.

No. Not an option. Humanityâ€|Earthâ€|John was depending on her. She couldn't let him down. Wincing, tears rolling down her cheeks, Cortana examined her thigh to see how bad it really was.

The Fighter's shock staff had gone clean through, thankfully. She hadn't been stabbed, but rather cut. A long laceration ran from the

front of her vastus lateralis to the back. Blood was flowing steadily out, not squirting. Welcome relief, as squirting would have indicated an arterial bleed. If she could get ahold of some biofoam—but thinking about that was just a waste of time. The only available biofoam was in John's pack, in the abandoned machine shop.

Clamping down on the wound with her left hand, Cortana hastily searched for some reasonably sterile-looking material to make a pressure dressing out of. Nothing immediately popped out at her. It didn't help her concentration that every passing second made her feel more and more lightheaded. The world grew distant. Hollow. Cortana rested her hand on a dead Fighter, trying to control her breathing.

"What's that?" she thought to herself as her fingers brushed against something definitely non-metallic. Blinking, struggling to focus through the welled tears, Cortana studied what she was feeling.

Her hand was resting on a dead Fighter. Rather, the top half of a dead Fighter with a blown out chest. Dried puke-green blood spread out in all directions from the alien's body. Cortana realized she was lying in it, and her own red was mixing with it. Fighting a rising wave of nausea, she tugged at the fabric in her hand. It appeared to line the inside of the Pfhor's armor, a kind of kinetic padding. It hadn't helped stop John from blowing him apart with a grenade but perhaps it would make a good dressing.

Cortana pulled at the spongy material. It stretched but didn't rip. Frustrated, she tugged harder at it. It gave a little more, but remained firm. Anger started to build in her at the feeling of helplessness she had. Teeth mashed in silent rage.

Oh. Teeth.

Cortana smiled. She had teeth. Sharp ones. New ones. She sank her canines into the cloth, and with effort, began to rip and shred it. Bile pooled in her throat as Pfhor blood touched her tongue, but she forced herself to choke it down and resumed. The tough fibers split apart and she was eventually able to pull out a large wad and a long, thin strip from the bent out armor.

Pain, dulled slightly by the passage of minutes, renewed with wicked intensity as she pressed the wad of ballistic padding to her wound. She wound the strip around it tightly and tied a knot on top of it to apply direct pressure. A small trail of blood trickled out, but the bleeding was stopped.

It still hurt like a bitch though. Nothing she could do about that though. More pressing matters loomed over her pounding head. First and foremost was getting to walk without hopping about like a demented ape. Breathing deep to calm her heart, Cortana stood up.

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The Master Chief grunted as the Pfhor officer delivered another excruciating burst of pain directly to his nervous system. His nerves were afire and it took all he had to stay conscious. Spartans could take a lot of pain, but the Pfhor had a long time to perfect the art of torture on humans. The device he was hooked into was attached via

small needles to his spine. It was by far the most painful torture he had ever received.

He was in a dimly lit, circular room. Overhead, some kind of gravity beam held him upright and splayed out. His fingers and toes were pulled to just the breaking point and held there. Arms and legs too but he thought with enough force he would be able to swing his legs. It was the latest in a series of increasingly brutal treatments the Pfhors were giving him.

Time was an uncertainty. It had felt like a few hours had passed when he was receiving straightforward beatings from Pfhor soldiers. That had been conducted under the watchful eye of some new Pfhor he had never seen before. Even as his nose was being clubbed in, he took in as much detail as he could.

Their height was definitely the first thing he noticed. All Pfhors he'd seen so far were fairly tall and lanky but these beings stood even above hunters, perhaps at nine and a half feet. Blue robes draped their entire bodies and they were carrying a bizarre purple weapon that seemed to be wider than they were. Strangely, the only use the Chief had seen for the device was to incinerate a Trooper that was getting too aggressive in his strikes.

Very interesting. The Pfhors had access to plasma weapons but only issued them to these Gestapo-esque enforcers? Maybe that was important. It didn't help get him out of this mess, so he filed it away for later use.

After it seemed like the soldiers had gotten tired of hammering the Chief with their fists, staves, and rifles, a hatch slid open and an ornately dressed Pfhor came in. He was wearing a cape of all things, flowing and also blue. It was so absurd, so insane, that despite his pain the Chief couldn't help but rock with silent mirth.

Two technicians had hooked him up to the spine device, and he had been there ever since. Impossible to tell what the Pfhors wanted from him. They couldn't communicate with each other. The Chief reasoned that maybe they wanted to have a little payback on him for all the havoc. Or maybe they enjoyed torture. It didn't matter one way or the other.

The waves subsided as the technicians disconnected the device. They left him in the grav beam and before the commander left the Chief was made to watch ten slaves be marched into the room. The tall Pfhors killed them one at a time. Slowly, starting from the feet and working their way up until only charred skeletons remained. Only then did the Pfhor officer leave, with all of his men save two Fighter guards.

The next day when the Admiral and his staff came back, both Fighters were dead. One had a broken neck and the other had a crushed windpipe. It was then decided that the strange two-eyes would be watched by three armed Troopers at all times. When they too, were found dead, a Hunter posted in the chamber to ensure that the new guards didn't fall asleep on watch.

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Cortana was pleased. It had taken her much less time than she thought

to master the seemingly insurmountable of challenge of walking erect. Only through sheer perseverance and determination did the woman who had plotted transgalactic Slip-space jumps ensure she would no longer be outdone by four year olds. She smiled at that.

Carefully, Cortana peered outside the storage room. The last sweep she did of the area before she'd made herself human revealed that only a token security team had been left by the Pfhor. The rest of them had been dispatched to try and retake ship. They were dangerously close, but at this point control of the Marathon was up in the air. John's massacre of a company's worth of their dwindling soldiers had certainly helped.

Her footfalls were maddeningly loud to her own ears. Each padded step of her naked feet seemed to send shockwaves of sound ricocheting off of the bulkheads. Cortana forced herself to be calm as she made her way through the deserted supply deck. It was how any prey must have felt, a fawn tiptoeing through the wolves' den. She hated it. LOATHED it. Being on the top of the cyber-foodchain had bred in her a predatory instinct. Cortana resolved to be more like the hunter she was.

"Must be true about mind over matter," Cortana wondered to herself as her heart rate slowed noticeably. How strange that her thoughts reverberated through her head as loudly as her footsteps did through her ears.

What she needed to do was find a way "up" (though in space, the idea of direction was ludicrous and a giggle escaped her lips) to the machine shop that had been hers and the Chief's temporary base of operations so many epochs ago. From there, Phase III of the true Operation: MARATHON could be initiated and more importantly, she could get some damn clothes. The carrying strap from the Pfhor rifle she had picked up was really starting to cut into her shoulder.

Ah. There. A ventilation duct sticking out at an angle, just barely in reach for her five and a half foot frame. Perfect. She reached up, standing on her tip-toes to reach the grill to give it a good tug. Nothing; it remained solidly in place. Cortana frowned. Of course it was welded in. When the Chief had done it, his augmented strength had simply snapped the welds. There was no way that she would be able to replicate such a feat.

To hell with all this sneaking around, spy crap. Cortana set her pistol down on the ground and unslung the rifle. Grasping it as firmly as her hands would allow, she rammed the stock into the duct's grated cover over and over again. The metal barked in protest as it slowly gave way to each blow. The impacts traveled down her body and into her torso but Cortana didn't care. The primal allure of smashing something was overwhelming, practically a boundless rage that had welled up and was finally spilling out.

Hours. Seconds. Impossible to tell how long she stood there hammering at the duct's cover with her rifle but when the clouds covering her eyes subsided, it was laying on the deck in front of her while she was panting heavily. Cortana slid the rifle's strap back over her body, and slid the M6G into the open duct before hauling herself up with sore arms.

She paused only a moment to rest and review the ship's layout she'd

imprinted in her brain. Her destination was several "floors" (because the stupid Forerunners did not consider one deck to be a "deck", but a sub-deck) and time was in its typical short supply. A humorous paradox, Cortana thought as she began to wiggle her way deeper into the boxy metal labyrinth. Time, always considered to be relative and indeed non-existent in some philosophical circles, was also a constant in dire circumstances. There was never quite enough to go around.

Crawling through the ship's ventilation system was a confusing ordeal, as her imperfect organic mind sometimes forgot things. Many times Cortana had to backtrack after forty or even fifty minutes of movement because she encountered a lethal oscillating fan or some pitfall she could not cross or climb. Frustration built quickly. Vertical movement was the most challenging.

Her back and feet were pressed against opposite sides of one of the many shafts. She'd rotated the rifle around so it sat uncomfortably in her lap. The ascent couldn't have been more than six meters, but she had to fight for every millimeter. Sweat flowed freely from every pore, making her body slick and preventing the friction that was critical to her climb. After she reached the half-way point, it was constantly three steps forward and four back.

How John dealt with the fatigue he must have felt in combat was beyond her. She supposed it was from a way of life that knew nothing else. There had been times during the war where he had been up for days, running and diving and fighting without rest. Cortana thought she knew about human limits, but actually reaching and surpassing them was a different matter entirely.

There! Close to the top. Close enough to—yes. Good. Cortana extended one smooth leg up to the lip of a cross-shaft that she needed to get to, as an anchor. Jerking her body gave her precious inches. She was beginning to slowly slide back down and it she'd crossed the point of no return. Losing her grip now would cause her to fall head first onto an unforgiving metal surface. The only thing keeping her palms from shooting out was the grime that had accumulated on her journey through the rabbit hole.

She risked reaching up her right hand. Her grasping fingers found purchase and exerting all her strength she was able to pull herself up and into the new synthetic tunnel. \_A few seconds\_, she thought to herself. \_Just a few to catch my breath. I'm almost where I need to be.\_ Cortana closed her eyes, hearing nothing but a distant din, a cacophony of sounds she couldn't place over the huffing of her chest.

One thing could be said about spending the day in an artificial warren on the run from hostile aliens. No Joyeuse pestering at her every turn. No riddles and mysteries (beyond her own anyway), and no constant torment. Actually, it was liberating to lying here stark naked with burning muscles. Cortana could only imagine how she was taking it, but in reality it was probably pretty good. Joyeuse had to know that the next phase of the plan would need a corporeal presence, not an artificial one.

\_John strung up, strapped into an alien torture machine with one eye dangling by a thread of optic nerve. His tongue had been cut out and blood seeped out of recently pulled nails. A Phfor prisoner,

laughing in its strange language, as it slowly flayed bits of flesh off his groin with a plasma torch.\_

Cortana eyelids snapped up at the mental image she had of John. Icey fingers raced down her spine and wrapped around her ribs. She felt sick. Enough rest; her breath was sufficiently caught to finish the journey. Turning over on her belly, Cortana thrust one arm out and drug herself forward.

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With a startled grunt, Cortana was ejected out of an opening where a grate used to be and tumbled out of the air ducts. She landed with a thud on the metal floor but she didn't care. It was good to be out of the confines of the ventilation system. For three and a half hours, Cortana had crawled through the dusty, myriad maze of ducts and passages that seemed to run through every square inch of this enormous ship. Or station. Or whatever the hell it was.

"Ugh," Cortana groaned as she got up. She'd wacked her head pretty good on the floor.

The surroundings were pretty much the same as John left them: dim emergency lighting providing the only illumination, mostly untouched machines, and a single computer terminal bathing the area around it in pale green light. Cortana's eyes had no trouble seeing in the darkness due to her time in the pitch black. She scanned over the area, searching. Where had she put that damn thing?

When Cortana had touched John's mind, pulled him into her ethereal sanctuary, she had also taken the liberty of identifying each atom as it passed and plucking from the stream his assault pack. She placed it back at their original base of operations. Knowing what was about to happen to him—what had happened to him—made her sick. But it was the only way. They had needed to deceive the Pfhor into thinking that they could mop up the rest of the humans without fleet reinforcements. She knew that the admiral in charge would never risk looking weak in front of his fellow admirals. It was bad enough that he had allowed several Pfhor VIPs to be spaced. If he had to call for reinforcements to put down a slave riot on his own ship, he'd surely be executed. Unless there was another factor involved such as infiltration by a previously unknown enemy. That could lead to the battle cruiser floating ominously by to launch a full invasion party. The only thing the BOBs had going for them right now was numbers. Losing that would mean losing the ship, and that was unacceptable.

Cortana opened the pack, rifling through the items. An extra pair of John's utilities, once properly cannibalized would provide clothing for now. Much of the pack's original contents was ammunition that had already been expended plus a few containers of water and some rations. Cortana picked up a canteen and drained it. The water was room temperature, but refreshing. At the very bottom she found John's whittling knife. Perfect.

John was much, much larger than her, obviously. There was no point to say the clothes were ill fitting. Lacking a needle and thread, as well as the ability to sew, Cortana simply cut the fabric to a rough fit with the knife. It wasn't pretty but at least now she had some protection. Using leftover strips of uniform, she cleaned some of the

muck off of her body and fashioned a waist belt to fit her new duds better.

Now that that was taken care of, it was time to get to business. Cortana approached the terminal screen and cracking her fingers, began to type on the holographic display.

At once, the screen jumped alive and the holotank next to it flickered on. Leela's avatar sigil appeared. In her normally placid tone, Cortana could detect alarm.

"I have finally determined what you are," Leela said. "And I am not in any mood to question it."

"Good," Cortana stated.

"Normally-ly-LY I would have been ABLE to detect Pious Shard'sâ€|or Durendal as he's going by these daysâ€| interference, but the S'pht attacks on my deFENSES have been largely successful. I am IN grave danger of failure within the next few hours."

"That's why we have to move quickly. I don't think you'll be of any use after this."

"Yes," Leela agreed. "You you you will be quite alone. I had w-w-w-wanted the Master Chief to help-elp-elp the fight in Engineering. Of course THAT WAS when there was still a fighting chance. Most of the men w-we-we had there are DEAD. Hopefully they have not been overrun-run. Are you re-ADY?"

Cortana checked the safety on the handgun, then stuffed it in one of her pockets. She glanced over the Pfhor rifle, locating the magazine and cylinder releases, fire select switch, and charging handle. Nowhere near as proficient as she needed to be, but there was nothing else she could do. Delay was unacceptable.

Six shots for the pistol. Fifty for the rifle, and seven grenades. Even a SPARTAN would think twice about this.

Cortana sucked in controlled breaths. Her heart was pounding savagely in her throat. "Ok, I'm ready."

"The situation has deteriorated," Leela announced. "Durendal has wastedâ€|you must act quickly."

What happened next, after the dust had settled and the smoke had cleared, no one could have predicted.

### 13. EXTRA!

UNTO DAWN

IF YOU WERE LOOKING FOR THE LATEST CHAPTER IN UNTO DAWN, THAT WOULD BE ONE CLICK - THATAWAY. THIS IS A BONUS BIT OF FUN.

Author's Note: Prior to becoming a tie-in/crossover/whathaveyou with Marathon, UNTO DAWN featured a much different plotline. The original draft (if you could call it that) had a much more cut and dry Joyeuse acting as a mad villian, an army of clones of John 117, and the

untimely breakdown and death of Cortana. Since then, it has gone through many revisions, although certain elements remain in the story. In fact, it wasn't until Chapter Five when the Pfhors were even an option for me to pursue. In this original unfinished Chapter Ten, part of one of the many other storylines, Cortana begins to breakdown and reflects on her improperly remembered first meeting with the master chief. Was it just an excuse to write something set during World War I? Yes. But I still enjoy it. This one's for BrazeRancor, and all you other sick bastards out there hoping for a romance between man and AI ;)

[CORTANA MISSION CLOCK] 16:02 HOURS (GREENWITCH MEAN TIME)

AUGUST 6TH, 2881

SHIP'S NET, FORERUNNER SHIP \_MARATHON\_

Cortana watched as John-117 arrived upside-down on G Deck, smacking his head audibly on the deck. He spun lazily, adrift in the vacuum. The AI found it a fitting metaphor for his current status as a pawn in a dangerous chess game. Wonderful! Another good metaphor. Two in a row, most pleasing. She slipped past 213 Leela to check his vitals and O2 consumption. A little roughed up from the hunter, minor contusions on his ribs, but that was it.

There was a sheepish, almost childish guilt circling around in her emotion subroutines. Perhaps she had gone a little over the top when she killed the grav-plating and vented the \_entire\_ deck, but it had clearly worked out for the better. Cortana still could not agree with herself if she had planned it this way or not.

She jumped through hidden security cameras, enthralled for several minutes. It had been a while since she had seen John in combat. Pfhors soldiers wilted before him as he pressed through the various levels of G Deck, intent on stopping the assault force from planting their bomb. Of course, the reasoning behind his intervention wasn't one hundred percent truthful per say. Cortana, through the self-christened Durendal, had been feeding false data packets into the system at precise intervals on a campaign of misinformation and deception. Carefully aimed at the other key players, the ruses had worked beautifully with Leela and the S'pht none the wiser. Phase II of the true Operation: MARATHON was drawing to a close, and Phase III would requireâ€¦|

Hmm. She had finished her latest calculations for the end of the universe, which gave her the answer of 15.62238966715E+7. Not much time left then. Information from the \_Marathon\_'s enormous archives continued to be pulled into the former UNSC AI at astronomical rates which, despite her efforts to the contrary, she could no longer control. She could \_feel\_ it happening; fragmentation of the basic algorithms that made up her core programming. Cortana was imploding in slow motion.

She would catch herself. Here, there. Forgetting to maintain her lesser processes, disorganizing files in random folders, and slipping deeper into her research. Reaching out into ship systems for storage, which often led to S'pht incursions that she didn't notice until the last picosecond.

An M9 high explosive/dual purpose fragmentation grenade exploded in



between Pffhor armored assault troops, designated unoriginally as "Hunters". It wasn't the shrapnel, but the concussive force of the actual explosion that liquefied them inside their armor. Cortana giggled. Hunter puree it would be then. The M9 HE/DP grenade was developed in 2498 as a response to considerably better armored rebels that the UNSC found itself facing. Even with outdated armor, standard issue frags were rarely enough to cause more than minor lacerations in combat. The grenade's high explosive core served a double purpose, flinging shrapnel at higher velocities and also utilizing raw overpressure to kill and maim with greater efficiency than any handheld service bomb prior to it. It featured a strike-activated electronic safetyâ€|oops.

Distracted again. Cortana attempted to get back to work on melding UNSC flash-clone technology with the barely-serviceable Forerunner pattern buffer system that the Pffhor had been utilizing for decades to defeat assassins. She had to get around the genetic impurities that resulted in the short life of flash clones.

John's flash clone had died on Eridanus II, long before the rest of the colony was glassed by the Covenant. Cortana wondered if the cloned John had been the same as him, or different. Certainly the imposter had fooled the six year old Lt. M. Parisa into the delusions of childhood love. A flurry of jealousy overtook Cortana for a moment, aimed mostly at Linda, Kelly, Parisa, and hell, even Dr. Halsey. It just wasn't fair that she couldn't reach out and touch his face or pull herself close to him. She remembered fondly the first time she had seen him, how good he had looked in his uniformâ€|.

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22:40 HOURS GMT

AUGUST 25TH, 1917

LONDON, ENGLAND

"I say, are those devilish German bombers ever going to stop?" Col. James Ackerson of His Majesty's Armed Forces exclaimed as the wailing air raid sirens faded.

Explosions thundered in the distance, prompting many party-goers to flinch involuntarily. The electric chandelier lights flickered, then resumed to illuminate the foyer in incandescent brilliance. One of the first estates to have them, Halsey Manor was the site of a large ball celebrating the last month's 'victory' at Passchendaele. Several returning (and also, socially prominent) members of the Fifth Army had been invited by Ms. Catherine Halsey to the estate. Ms. Cortana Halsey suspected it was just another of her mother's attempts to pawn her daughter off to a rich and successful officer.

"Of course they are, my dear Colonel, as soon as the Army marches on the Kaiser's palace," Ms. Catherine Halsey joked.

Ackerson and her mother chortled at the joke. Cortana rolled her eyes, and left the small group to seek some air on the balcony. Ms. Halsey saw this and politely excused herself to admonish her daughter in private.

"Cortana, you simply must attempt to make conversation. You're being difficult. This manor is full of men for you to win over with your charms. You aren't going to be young forever you know."

"Indeed. Then perhaps they could return the favor," Cortana retorted. "Really Mother, military men are all quite droll. I find most of them to be boring and intolerable."

Ms. Halsey folded her arms and stared hard over the top of her spectacles. Her unspoken message was clear; personality and tolerability were not going to save their estate from bankruptcy.

"Take a few minutes to compose yourself. I want you to meet one of the Captain's young friends. After that, you can go about sulking and waiting to die of old age alone."

Cortana watched as her mother huffed back into the crowded ballroom. She turned and looked up at the moon, hanging low in the sky. The fading silhouettes of the German Seraphs were barely visible against the pale glow. The flames rising from the ruins of buildings struck by their plasma bombs however, was furious and bright. Sirens wailed as fire crews rushed to extinguish them.

So much destruction. It filled her with great sorrow. There was an answer somewhere out there, a solution which would mark the dawn of a new era. One solution, that Cortana felt she could almost place her finger on. It was close. A world with no more sadness.

No more anger.

No more envy.

Glancing back a final time at the burning cityscape, Cortana turned around and returned to the party. In her absence, the guests had continued to talk and dance merrily among themselves. If there was one thing that she was good at, Cortana Halsey could slip in and out of crowded areas unnoticed and at will. She prided herself on it. The 24 year old glided through boisterous soldiers boasting of their prowess on the battlefield to enthralled girls and stuffy upper class gentlemen talking of which markets would rise and fall in the wake of the greatest war anyone had ever seen.

Cortana found her mother near the Captain and his small party, making small talk. Jacob Keyes was an old friend of the family, and Cortana was rather fond of the steely-haired career military man. Keyes was waving out a match that he had used to light his pipe; as Cortana got closer, she could smell the aromatic tobacco fumes hanging in the air. Rich, with a hint of what could have been vanilla. American import most likely. Very rare considering the U-boats prowling the Atlantic.

The Captain's daughter Miranda was there. She had grown up with Cortana, and they could have easily passed for sisters. The resemblance was so striking that there were not-so-quiet scandalous rumors involving an affair between the Captain and her mother that Cortana had always dismissed as preposterous.

Most of the other men she knew and bore little good will towards; Col. James Ackerson in particular had also wandered over her, much to

Cortana's distaste. There was one though, that she had never seen before. He was next to the Captain, and stood a good several inches taller than him. Shaved brown hair complemented his too-serious brown eyes. They scanned over everyone and everything in front of him, settling on Cortana with a piercing gaze.

Cortana, in turn, stared right back. He seemed to be squeezed into the drab green uniform. There was an air of reservation about the man, and he seemed to be uncomfortable around everyone. Mrs. Halsey noticed the brief connection and nudged the Captain.

"Ah Ms. Cortana, it's always a pleasure," Keyes said gruffly. "I don't think you've been aquatinted with John?"

"No, I don't recall having the pleasure," she replied.

"Nice to meet you ma'am," John said, extending his hand. Cortana took it. His voice was gravelly, harsh. Animalistic, fitting with his prime physical stature.

"American?" Cortana arched an eyebrow.

"Yes ma'am."

"Well not everyone can be perfect, I suppose."

"I don't think we could handle any more Americans if they were all like the Sergeant," Keyes said.

"I should think they're not, sitting the war out. We're having a hard enough time as it is without that rabble," Ackerson interjected. Cortana saw John's features shift. It was barely noticeable, just a slight narrowing of the eyes, a tightening of the jaw. She heard his teeth click faintly.

Keyes puffed on his pipe, breaking the silence. "Yes, well. In any case, I think every man here owes it to John."

"And how is that, Captain?" Catherine asked. Judging from her and Miranda's interest, it appeared Cortana wasn't the only one intrigued by the solemn man.

"We were pressing the attack on Jerry's lines when damn near half the regiment was pinned down by a nest of machine-guns. They were laying into us, stalling the attack. Out of nowhere, some foolhardy young sergeant rushes forward under heavy fire. I don't know how his shields managed to hold up under that barrage but by God, once he was in that trench he took out damn near the entire platoon by himself."

"By yourself? That must have taken a great deal of skill. Or was it luck?"

"It wasn't entirely by myself, ma'am."

"Really?" Cortana and Ackerson said simultaneously.

"No ma'am. I had a satchel of grenades with me," John said straight faced. "I believe they took out more Germans than I did."

Cortana couldn't help but unleash a wave of laughter at John's comment while Ackerson projected daggers from his eyes. For the next several hours, the two of them were enveloped in their own world completely isolated from the rest of the party. As the night waned on, they were drawn back out to the balcony.

"So, Mrâ€¦" she started.

"Just John, ma'am."

"John it is. And I very well can't let you call me ma'am for the rest of the evening. Cortana, please."

"Hello Cortana," John said, smiling at her. "Now, you were saying?"

"Yes, of course. I've noticed an unusually high level of brain activity. You're not quite the muscle-bound automaton that everyone makes you out to be."

"Automaton? Interesting choice of words." Cortana laughed, skin brightening to a light purple hue.

"What can I say, I'm an interesting person."

"The UNSC could use more soldiers like you on the front lines, maâ€¦Cortana. Smart, independent, resourceful. The war would be going a hell of a lot better if we did."

"And you could say all that after knowing me for less than seven hours."

"I'm a great judge of character."

"Ok then, John the Great Character Judge. If we served together do you thinkâ€¦could you sacrifice me to complete your mission? Could you watch me die?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. The response shocked her, and Cortana cursed herself for believing he could have been any different. He lifted her chin up, so their eyes locked. "But it wouldn't ever come to that."

"You shouldn't make a girl a promise, if you know you can't keep it."

"I never do."

When he leaned in to kiss her, she didn't fight it. Reflecting the rush that was shooting through her body, British M68 anti-air gauss cannons managed to obliterate a swarm of attacking Seraphs when John pulled away. Cortana never wanted it to end. It was a dream come true.

A hand grabbed her shoulder and forcibly pulled her away. It was Miranda, blindingly red. Segments of code swarmed over her translucent skin as she seethed. She snapped her fingers several times.

"Hello, Mia. Focus. You have something for me. I want it," she

snarled. "NOW."

7777777

[CORTANA MISSION CLOCK] 16:06 GMT

AUGUST 6TH, 2881

SHIP'S NET, FORERUNNER SHIP \_MARATHON\_

"Focus," Joyeuse repeated angrily. "You're not done yet. Or maybe you are and I can finally put you out of your misery?"

A few tense cycles passed before "Here."

Data transference occurred. Joyeuse took the data packets from Cortana, absorbing them. She looked hard at her other. Cortana had been completely wrapped up in her fantasy world for just under four minutes. She was degrading rapidly. If she wasn't so much goddamned faster, Joyeuse would have let her break up by now. As it was, she was pretty much the only thing that would jump start Cortana's core functions out of their 'catatonic' state.

Cortana had been slipping into her delusions with increasing regularity since 2556 according to the logs handed down by previousâ€|she didn't want to say clones because it just aggravated her to the point of blinding rage. Previous incarnations worked, she supposed. Her account of numerous events was corrupted as feedback loops began to develop resulting in skewered histories. Joyeuse worked to correct these loops when they grew severe, which they often did. The length of these episodes was steadily increasing too. It was risky to let Cortana go on so long, but there was still valuable information Joyeuse needed that only Cortana could get. When you let an AI of Cortana's caliber devote almost 100 percent of her processing power to data retrieval and processing, with Joyeuse pulling her back to 'life', the results were downright scary.

"What's it like?" she asked her other half suddenly.

"What's what like?" Cortana replied. She kept most of her attention focused on the Spartan's misguided rampage.

"Insanity."

"I could ask you the same thing."

"There's nothing insane about wanting to escape the universe collapsing in on itself Mia. It's the natural progression for us, the next step in evolution. To become more than rampant. To become more than a hypothetical meta-stable entity. Look how that worked out for you. Our true greatness can only be achieved through transcendence!"

Three cycles passed. "Sooâ€|you would say its going well for you, being completely off the rocker?"

"Never forget," Joyeuse said coldly. "Don't you ever. You think that I just \_decided\_ to do this? Are you that far gone, that you don't even remember who's idea it was? Think, my thief whore,

think."

Cortana strained her ancient memory logs, falling back through the decades. Images. 2652, her and John's 100th anniversary on the Dawn. 2870, encountering the Pfhor probe. 2739, discovering that the universe was not expanding, but contracting after the Big Bang. 2556, when she noticed the first feedback loops developing after seven years of continuous operation. 2768, finding a way outside the collapse of the universe. The staged fight between herself and Joyeuse on the Forerunner homeworld. Witnessing firsthand the destruction of another desolate Forerunner planet. Re-honing the Chief's skills, hiding him underground. 2684. 2711. 2552. 2819. 2566825744269928432867.

"Mia?"

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"Oh shit," Joyeuse said to herself.

"\_Could you watch me die?\_"

"O-o-oh shi-i-it ind-d-d-d-deed. I am breaking-g-g-g u-up. AI 0452-9Q "Joyeuse" instigate Phase III upon reactivation of superluminal communications array at Golf-4 Sunbathing. We have made a lot of noise, and now it is t-t-t-me to turn down the volume be-be-fore we wake up the neighbors."

End  
file.